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ABSTRACT

Beginning in middle school, there is an increasing gap between school and the home. In linguistically and ethnically diverse communities, there is often an even greater separation between children's school lives and the home. This toolkit provides teachers, particularly new teachers and those in high-poverty urban and rural communities, with information and strategies about how to successfully work with parents to help all children succeed. Five chapters focus on (1) "Introduction: Linking Family Involvement and Student Success"; (2) "Improving Home-School Communications" (e.g., sample welcoming letter, how to avoid an impasse with a parent, and what to include in a newsletter, flyer, or Web site for parents); (3) "Helping Parents Support Schoolwork at Home" (e.g., 11 reasons parents and students need to do schoolwork together, what to expect in the classroom, and a homework assignment to involve parents); (4) "Coming Together To Guide Student Success" (e.g., steps to college and how to be school savvy); and (5) "Sparking Whole School Change" (e.g., sample parent involvement survey, what to include in a family center, and sample letter of inquiry). Each chapter presents key issues, information on what one teacher can do, and tools for success. (SM)

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A TOOLKIT FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

Connect for Success:

Building a teacher, parent, teen alliance

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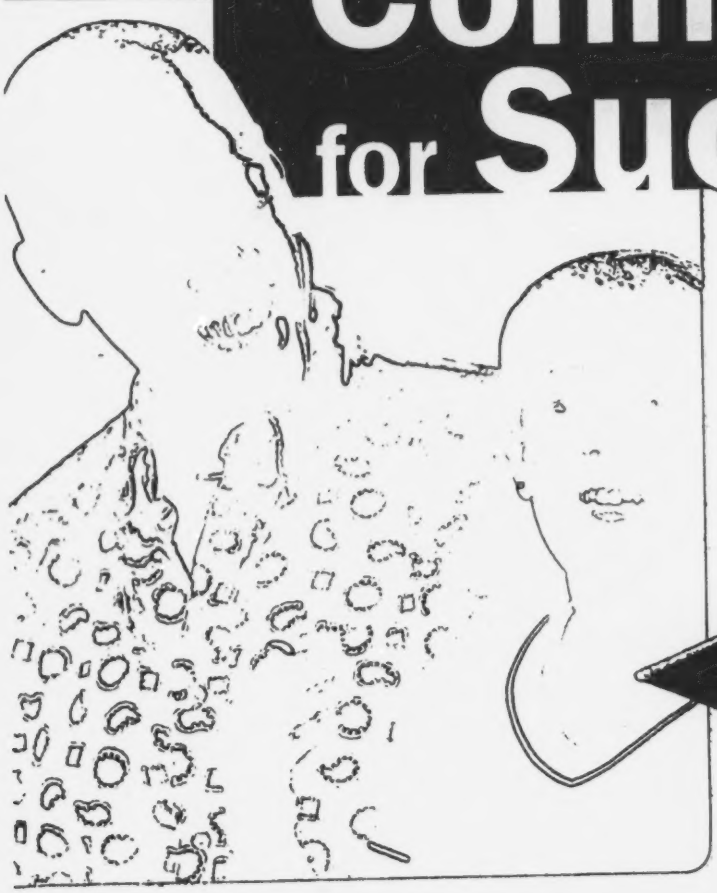
Connect for Success:

Building a teacher, parent, teen alliance



RNT

About RNT

Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. (RNT) is a national nonprofit organization formed in 1986 to raise esteem for teaching, expand the pool of prospective teachers, and improve the nation's teacher recruitment, development, and diversity policies and practices.

For more information about RNT, contact us at (617) 489-6000, 385 Concord Avenue, Belmont, MA 02478; rnt@rnt.org; www.rnt.org. Be sure to visit RNT's National Teacher Recruitment Clearinghouse at www.recruitingteachers.org.

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Foreword

Beginning in middle school, when students have different teachers for each subject and teachers typically have more than 100 students, there is an increasing gap between educator and student, student and parent, and teacher and the home. During the transition from middle school into high school, students are less likely to talk to their parents about all aspects of their lives. School and home grow farther away; schoolwork becomes more difficult; and there is less time for parents and children, parents and teachers to communicate with each other about school. In high-poverty communities, where there are often language, cultural, and ethnic differences, there often is an even greater separation between home and school. As parents, teachers, and students become increasingly disengaged from one another, the chances for students' academic and personal success are threatened.

Connect for Success: Building a Teacher, Parent, Teen Alliance provides a unique resource for new teachers in high-poverty middle and high schools. It contains practical strategies, suggestions, and useful tools for increasing parental involvement—drawn from research—and suggestions from teachers who teach in urban and rural middle and high schools. With an expanded concept of "parent" based on an understanding that many grandparents, neighbors, relatives, and friends assume responsibility for and influence teenagers, the toolkit shows educators how to help break down the barriers between school, family, and community.

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Graphic Design
Myriad Inc

Photography
Most photographs by Jason Green

Project Advisors

Velma Cobb, Ed.D.,
Director of Education and Youth Development Policy and Research, National Urban League

Joyce Epstein, Ph.D.,
Director, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, Johns Hopkins University

Nicole Francis, Education Program Coordinator, NAACP

Norm Fruchter, Executive Director, Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University

Anne Henderson, Education Policy Consultant, Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University

Vinetta Jones, Ph.D., Dean, School of Education, Howard University

L. Fernando Milan, Ed.D.,
Staff Director, Roxbury Unites for Families and Children, Inc.

Marchelle Raynor, Co-Chair, Boston Public Schools Family and Community Engagement Task Force

John Wherry, Ed.D., President, The Parent Institute & The Teacher Institute

Contributing Educators

Margie Bognadow
Parenting Resources Associates, Inc.
Lexington, MA

Eileen Chen
Abby Schirmer
The Fenway School
Boston, MA

Stephanie Eastwood
Frank Newman Middle School
Cotulla, TX

Jan Hedberg
Horizonte Alternative High School
Salt Lake City, UT

Cheryl Levin
Beth Massey
Marie Murray
The Ferryway School
Malden, MA

Alex MacLeod
Laura Maxwell
Brian Vecoli
Elayne Walker-Cabral
Scott Weber
The Metropolitan Career and Technical Center, Providence, RI

Emily Murray
Nichols Middle School
Evanston, IL

Mariola Pik
Irving Park Middle School
Chicago, IL

Mark Tashjian
The Children's Storefront
New York, NY

Beverly Silverstein
Creshaw High School
Los Angeles, CA

Jerry Cannon
Yeatman Middle School
St. Louis, MO

Many thanks go to the researchers on whose work we have drawn, advisors who reviewed the toolkit and provided input, and teachers who discussed their own challenges and successful strategies so that you, and other teachers across the country, might benefit from their experiences.

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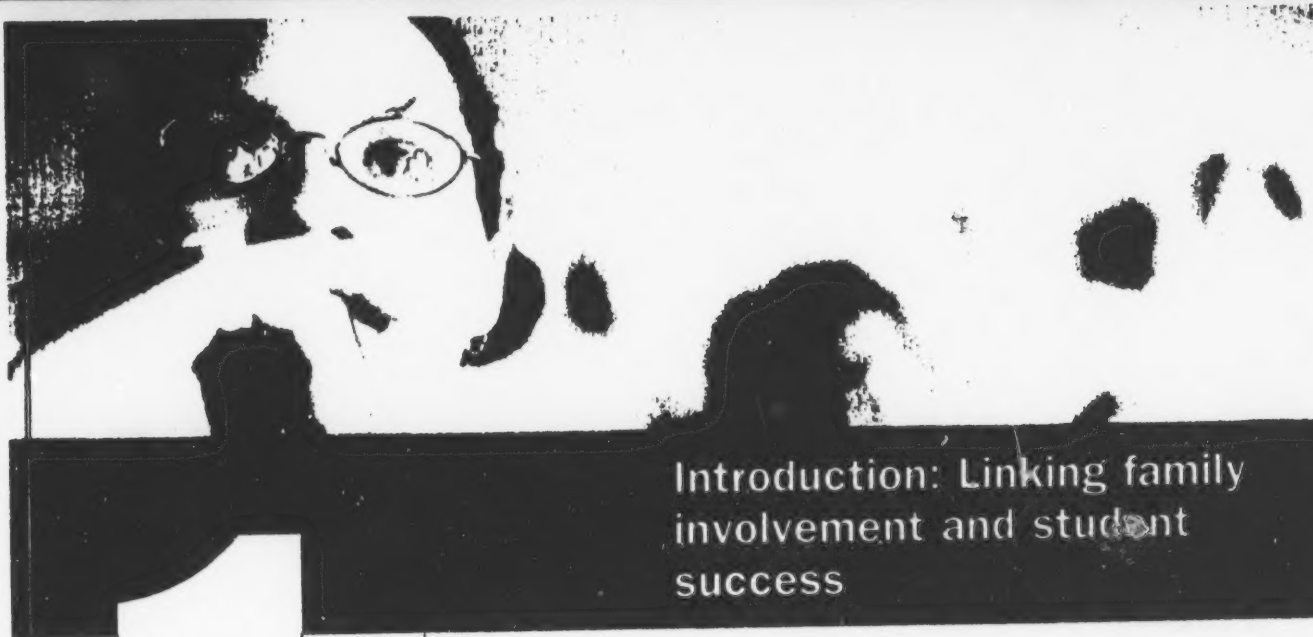

Introduction: Linking family involvement and student success

I would say that the vast majority of parents really want their children to do well, but for high school, there's the attitude that now the kids are more on their own and more independent. But making the effort to work with parents gives me insight into what kind of relationship the parent has with their child. When the parent trusts me, they are able to give me some suggestions about their child. What I learn from parents is that a different approach works better with some students. I'm a lot more perceptive now and I think I understand the meanings behind students' behaviors better. It's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. You have one positive interaction with a parent, and you think, "Okay, I'll get in touch with another parent." The more positive interactions you have, the more feedback you get, the more you want to do, and the better you feel about things... and the better you are with parents.

Emily Murray, Evanston, IL

KEY ISSUES

- Parent involvement* can have a positive effect on students' academic and personal success.
- There are many barriers to involving families that can be overcome with heightened teacher awareness and simple strategies.
- Developing a shared view of students' progress, goals, and needs—among parents, students, and teachers—increases the chances for student success.
- Reluctance to be involved in school isn't an indication that parents don't care about their children's academic performance.
- All parents want success for their children.
- One teacher can make a difference by learning about, communicating with, and supporting students and parents.

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*Throughout this toolkit, when the term "parent(s)" is used, it refers to individuals who are involved in the student's life on a daily basis and have taken on the major responsibility as the child's chief caretaker.

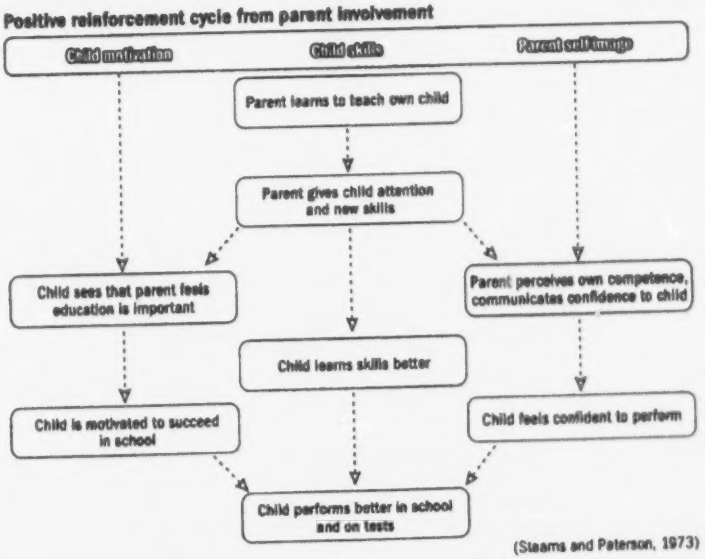
Involvement increases student achievement and impacts the future

Research shows...
A 1988 longitudinal study of over 11,000 high school students, parents, and principals revealed that parent involvement activities "positively influenced students' English and math report card grades, course credits completed, attendance, good behavior, and how well-prepared students were when they came to class." (*Type 2*, 2001, Spring)

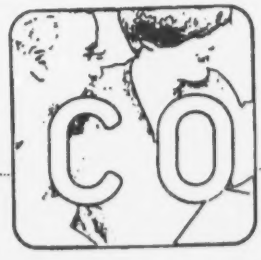
The parent, who has had years of experience with what motivates and interests their child, is one of the most important sources for information about how to help and support a student appropriately. Continued support from teachers and family—adjusted for the increasing independence that adolescents need—is critical to teenagers' developmental progress. Even as adolescents are becoming more and more independent, they are still looking to the adults in their lives to provide them with support and guidance. Teachers and parents need to help teenagers figure out how to understand themselves, structure and control their environment, and make decisions. Students, although they probably won't admit it, appreciate the fact that the adults in their lives are attempting to understand and assist them. Fostering an environment of teacher-parent cooperation sends a message to students that the adults in their lives are sharing information and care about what they are doing. In fact, teenagers report that they would like their parents and teachers more involved in helping them succeed academically and plan for their future.

Research shows...
Family involvement affects student achievement.

Positive reinforcement cycle from parent involvement


Child motivation
Child skills
Parent self-image
Parent learns to teach own child
Parent gives child attention and new skills
Child sees that parent feels education is important
Parent perceives own competence, communicates confidence to child
Child learns skills better
Child is motivated to succeed in school
Child feels confident to perform
Child performs better in school and on tests

(Stearns and Peterson, 1973)



communicate

Involvement brings challenges

Bringing parents into school activities can be difficult, especially for middle and high school teachers. Family attendance at school events dwindles after elementary school, and some teachers assume that families aren't interested in their adolescents' education. You may have heard from other teachers in your school that "these parents don't care." Your school, like many schools, may be disconnected from the communities in which students live and may rarely, if ever, provide opportunities for teachers, students, and their families to mix—either formally or informally. Parents and teachers in large, urban communities often don't have the opportunity to talk to one another at religious services and events, the grocery store, or on the sidewalk, the way adults in smaller, closer-knit communities do. The lack of informal relationships can hinder parents' and students' understandings about what teachers consider appropriate at school, which affects relationships with teachers and, ultimately, impacts student success.

If you teach in a high-poverty school, you have a special responsibility to work with parents. In low-income communities, many factors that put students at risk can come together for a concentrated, detrimental impact on student achievement. Parents, who have so many hopes pinned on their children's receiving a good education, can become frustrated by the conditions of their communities.

Adding to the challenge, it is more than likely that you have not had any formal training, or even any courses, in how to work with the families of your students. Even if you did receive such training, if you teach or expect to teach in an urban or remote rural community, you may encounter students and families facing challenges that are new to you, and ones that can frustrate traditional strategies.

You *can* engage parents, despite the challenges. Parents of all economic backgrounds—upper-, middle-, and working-class parents—value educational success, want their children to do well, and see themselves as helping and supporting their children's academic success. Low attendance at events and lack of participation at school can occur for many reasons: scheduling problems, lack of knowledge about how to become involved, inability to understand English, and reluctance to agree with your methods are just a few. In addition, parents may fear they will fail their children due to a lack of information or experience, and may be afraid that teachers will not value their children's education as much as they do. Poor attendance at school events is not an indication that parents don't care or can't contribute to their child's learning experience.

Consensus Is Important

Research shows...
Teachers, parents, and students have very different perceptions of the others' point of view about issues. For instance, 60% of students report that they are "very confident" they will achieve their goals for the future, but just half of parents (52%) and only 19% of teachers are very confident their students will achieve their goals. (MetLife Survey 2000)

A shared view of the student's potential, progress, and plans—among parents, teachers, and students—is critically needed to overcome the gap that leaves many of today's adolescents falling through the cracks, without adult guidance. Parents have information teachers need; teachers have a view of teenagers that parents need; and adolescents need to understand, from the adults in their lives, how to achieve personally and academically. Effective parent involvement in children's learning provides the connection between home and school that promises to offer teens the support they need to succeed in today's world.

As a middle school or high school teacher, or student teacher, you no doubt have your own ideas about where your students are headed—whether or not they have potential to succeed, whether they are going to college, and what kind of career they are going to have. You may even feel you can guess what students' attitudes are about a lot of issues. But have you, your students, and their families discussed where a student is headed? Do you share a common understanding of what a particular student needs and wants from parents and teachers?

Parents can enrich teaching practice

Research shows...
High schools that reach out to families and develop strong partnerships with parents are more likely to be rated positively by families.
(Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999)

Teachers rely less on stereotypical beliefs about parents and families when they are in regular contact with the families. And, increased involvement with parents ultimately improves teachers' practice, as each teacher develops a better understanding of his or her students' lives, cultures, ethnic groups, and day-to-day experiences. With input from parents and others involved in the student's life, teachers can form a complete picture of the student, which can help ensure that the teacher's efforts are appropriate and effective.

Knowledge that teachers can gain from parents also can affect teachers' having realistic and high expectations of students. The *expectancy theory* states that the way teachers treat students often is dependent upon their expectations (Brophy and Good, 1974). If teachers expect students to perform poorly, they treat students according to those expectations. Students then begin to behave in ways that *reinforce* teachers' negative expectations. On the other hand, if teachers expect a lot from students, they perform better. Says one sixth-grade Texas teacher:

"*My students thought everything was 'too hard' for them. If teachers buy that, it's almost like prejudice. I am very aware that my choices and the way I act can affect their whole future.*"

Despite adolescents often acting as if they don't care what adults think, young people do fear negative judgments. Teachers need to show flexibility and open-mindedness in accepting individual behavior and learning styles.

Consider this!

- Parents' work schedules, caring for other children, or other responsibilities can prevent parents from working with their children at home or from attending meetings or conferences.
- Parents from certain cultures may not be comfortable making requests of schools, which represent authority and can be frustratingly bureaucratic.
- Parents may feel insecure about their ability to read assignments or invitations sent home, and also may have concerns about their ability to communicate with teachers. Some parents may also have tenuous immigration status and may be unsure how the school will handle that.
- Parents may not have education training or positive parenting role models and simply may not know where to start to help their children.
- Parents often are unsure about whether they should play a role in their children's education, about what role they would play, and whether the school really wants them to be involved.
- Transportation and safety issues/concerns can keep parents from attending meetings and events at school.

WHAT ONE TEACHER CAN DO

"The largest group of adult immigrants are between the ages of 25 and 34, an age group dominated by young parents." (Rodriguez, 2001b)

You may already know that parent involvement in their children's education can improve students' academic performance, attendance, attitudes, graduation rates, and admission to college. But what exactly does that mean to your everyday life in school? How do you, as a teacher, increase parent involvement in your own classroom?

Get to know and understand your students

Getting the whole picture of a student is important because it has a direct impact on student achievement and plans for the future. Students' home lives can significantly influence their performance in school—additional responsibilities may prevent them from doing homework, for example. In addition, in some communities, factors such as poverty and family circumstances can directly impact students' readiness to learn, and the amount of time and energy parents can spend on school-related activities.

Parents can be important sources of information about students for teachers, especially new teachers—they know their children, their learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, and patterns of behavior better than anyone else. Parent input is important because it can impact teacher expectations. It is critical that teachers and families come together to gain a common understanding of how each student learns and what each student needs. As you read this toolkit, you will learn how teachers can lead the way toward a shared perception of a student by improving communication with parents at conferences and other school events, creating assignments geared toward understanding all aspects of a student's life, and developing specific approaches to reaching out to parents to gain important information about students and their families.

Get to know and understand the parents

Research shows...
Households with single mothers and children under 18 increased 165% between 1970 and 2000, and the "traditional" married couple family now represents just 51% of households. (Rodriguez, 2001a)

When inviting "parents," try to expand your thinking to mean "adults who have significant influence on a student's life." Families in the United States have changed significantly over the last several decades. Single mothers run more than 20% of households with children; the number of single mothers is disproportionately high in urban communities. Some of your students probably have single parents, young, working parents, an extended family, or friends who have assumed caretaking roles. Often, grandparents are very involved with raising their children's children, and older siblings step into caretaking roles as well. As you will read in Chapters 3 and 4 of this toolkit, getting to know parents and family roles involves participating in the community in which you teach.

tip Send surveys and a variety of materials that elicit in depth answers to questions about families, phone parents, and schedule informal ways to get to know one another.

Given the changing nature of families, teachers must adapt old ideas and strategies—such as assuming mothers are at home and are available for meetings with teachers during the day, or taking it for granted that there is a second parent to care for young children during evening school events. Later in this toolkit you will learn how and why teachers reach out to and involve those who are key influences in students' lives in order to develop an understanding of and appreciation for a variety of family lifestyles.

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Schools and teachers who fail to acknowledge the significance of cultural barriers, or the fact that negative experiences with schools may prevent parents from having the "know-how" to negotiate the school bureaucracy, only serve to reinforce misconceptions about families and further limit their involvement (Haynes and Ben-Avie, 1996).

The bottom line is that you can't make assumptions about your students and families. You can't look at certain students and know they aren't going to perform well in your classroom, assume that certain parents don't care, or guess that certain students will do well in your class because of their cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Unfounded and unrealistic expectations can hinder progress, damage self-esteem, and discourage participation.

"Isn't it ironic that at the age our students MOST need the adults in their lives to be closely involved, it seems to be the time that parents seem to pull away?" asks one experienced teacher.

Improve communications

Research shows...
Teachers have higher expectations of students whose parents are active in their children's schooling and such students are likely to work harder because they sense their parents care. (Toch, 2001)

Fostering an environment of teacher-parent communication and cooperation, by maintaining regular phone and personal contact with parents, is important because it sends a message to students that the adults in their lives are sharing information and care about what they are doing. Strengthening communications can be the starting point for building relationships of mutual trust that can improve parent participation, student achievement, and prospects for students' futures.

Help parents help their children

Parents want to help, but don't know how. For instance, parents of students in middle school and high school face the challenge of dealing with more teachers than in the elementary school, and those teachers are concentrating on their specialty subjects. Parents may not be clear about which professional they need to talk to about their children's academic and personal issues. Even identifying yourself as the "point person" for particular students can help. At an open house or class event, let parents know that they can call you about any issues related to their child and that if you can't help them, you can refer them to the right person.

Connect parents, colleagues, and the community

Students can (and do) fall through the cracks because of lack of direction and assistance. Therefore, a close relationship of mutual trust among parents, teachers, and students can act as a "safety net" to ensure all students receive support and guidance. In this toolkit, you will find ideas about how to develop respect for all parents so that your interactions with parents will be easy and comfortable. When students are supported by several professionals in the school, and parents feel knowledgeable and comfortable coming to school and getting involved, this safety net is more likely to stay with students as they move from class to class and grade to grade. In Chapter 5 of this toolkit, you can read about reaching out beyond your classroom to begin to make improvements in your whole school and in your district.

* * *

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, there are many barriers to meaningful parental involvement. However, one teacher can make a difference in the lives of students and families. By appreciating the resources that parents and families can bring to education, changing your classroom practice, and working with other professionals in the school, you can help build the teacher-parent-teen alliances that will improve students' academic and personal success—now and in the future.

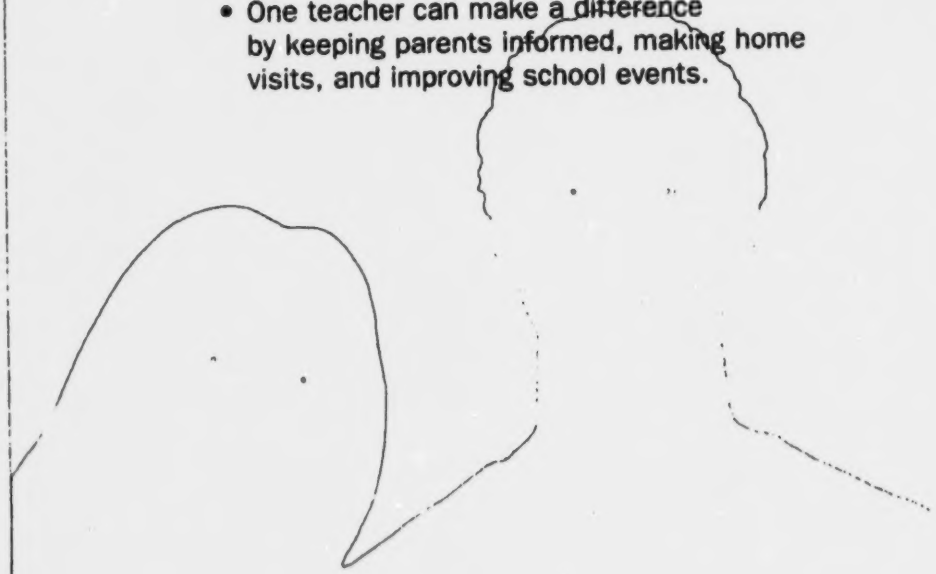
2

Improving home-school communications

I taught in a small, rural, 87% Mexican American community in Texas, with a population of about 3,000, where close to 100% of students qualified for reduced or free lunch. When I taught young elementary school students, I had a relationship with parents on a daily basis. It was a different story when I started in the middle school and I never even saw the parents. Just a phone conversation is worth a lot—not just to solve a problem, but to get to know the parent and student. Parents opened up to me and told me about themselves, their lives, and their hopes and dreams for their children. We were able to work as partners who shared high expectations for the children. I learned to see the parent as a source of expertise and that a parent is not just a tool to get at the child—the parent is someone who you have to develop a relationship with.
Stephanie Eastwood, Cotulla, TX

KEY ISSUES

- Knowing the community and understanding the lifestyles and backgrounds of your families improves efforts to engage parents in school activities.
- Gaining an understanding of cultural differences adds to a teacher's ability to establish relationships with parents.
- Learning how to communicate with parents in meaningful ways helps prevent misunderstandings.
- One teacher can make a difference by keeping parents informed, making home visits, and improving school events.



Understanding of the community is critical

An important goal for parent/teacher/student communication is a shared and full understanding of the student's potential, progress in school, plans for the future, and progress in attaining goals. This can be a challenging process. Some parents of adolescents, for example, want teachers to take responsibility for their student's future and handle problems that come up at school. Other parents might want teachers to stay out of family matters. There also are teachers who want parents to stay out of things and let them do their work. And, there are many adolescents who wish everyone would leave them alone!

Outreach goes beyond inviting parents to events and hoping they will come. Successful efforts require getting to know the parents in the community. In order to tailor a program to your parents' needs, it is important to understand their interests, strengths, inhibitions, and beliefs; assess how the parents feel about working with you; and be sensitive to parents' schedules and the lives they live.

Feeling comfortable talking with parents and making them feel comfortable talking with you, and with their adolescents, is fundamental to building relationships of mutual trust. And trust is a necessity! When discipline issues arise, you will need to work with the parent on figuring out what is the best approach for that particular child. If parents aren't comfortable talking with you, you are losing a valuable partner who has information you need.

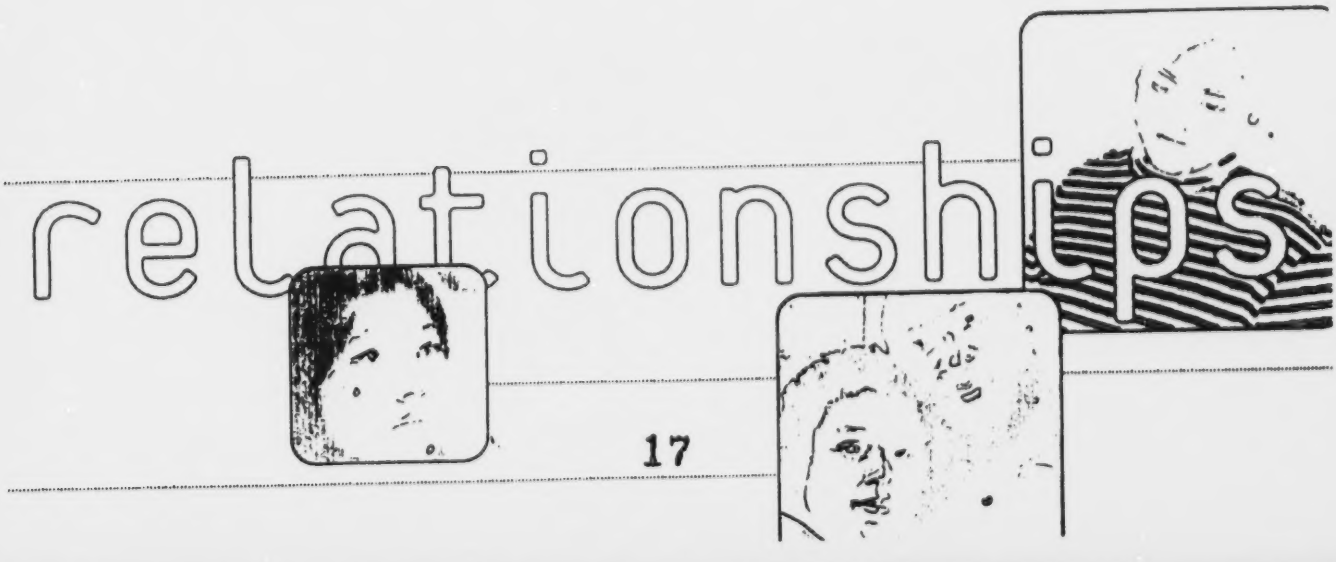
In some middle and high schools, there are few opportunities to communicate with parents. Some school systems do not even offer regularly scheduled parent conferences, open houses, and other events for middle and high school parents. And, informal contact is limited, as students usually get back and forth to school on their own.

> "The problem with the label 'hard to reach' is that the difficulty in establishing communication is placed on the parents rather than on the methods educators have developed to reach out."
>
> (Swap, 1993)

Cultural differences play a key role

One of the most important skills necessary to successfully communicate with parents is the ability to listen. Good listening skills involve the ability to interpret verbal as well as nonverbal messages. This is an area where cultural and ethnic differences can come into play.

As a new teacher, you should familiarize yourself with the culture of students in your classes and in your community. Knowing about the cultural habits, beliefs, and values of your students' families can increase effective communications and prevent misunderstandings. For example, if a teacher says that a child is "outstanding" in a subject, some parents may interpret this comment to mean "standing out"—a characteristic considered undesirable by some Latino parents who may find it unacceptable for one individual to attract special attention.



Research shows...
The non-direct questioning style, typical of many white teachers, confuses some African American children who may be used to the more direct communication style of their parents. (Delpit, 1995)

Consider the difference that direct language makes to a student in a situation in which a teacher is giving feedback about the student's writing: "Is this what you really wanted to say?" versus "You need to clarify what you are saying here because I don't understand what you mean."

Cultural patterns often dictate:

- The appropriate distance between two persons
- The meaning of eye contact
- The appropriateness of touch and expected physical posture
- Who should initiate conversation
- Whether interruptions are acceptable
- The expected time between a question and a response
- Whether and how to bring up problems
- How adults should express their authority to inform children, and support independence

Talking versus communicating

Parents, teachers, and students need a way to speak to one another about school.

Research shows...
Fifty-nine percent of parents of teens say they talk about school every day to their children, yet only 23% of teens say they talk about school every day with at least one of their parents. (MetLife Survey 2000)

"Early adolescents are notorious for failing to communicate with their parents about what they are doing in school. They also have been known to play teacher against parent and parent against teacher as they engage in selective recall and 'spin' about their missing assignments or questionable behavior. Only by forming an alliance can parents and teachers effectively work together to help students negotiate the treacherous path through the middle school years." (Miller, 1998)

What constitutes "talking about school"? Parents often feel that just bringing up the topic of school is a "conversation" about school. Teens may have a different view of questions from parents. When a student comes home from school and the parent says, *"What did you do in school today?"* the typical student response is *"Nothing."*

If parents don't have a realistic picture of a child's school day, knowledge of the teachers, or understanding of the kinds of activities that go on in class, they have little to say to their kids. The result? Students are quiet around their parents about their lives at school and parents feel left out and don't know what questions to ask them.

Similarly, if a teacher lacks knowledge about students' families, friends, and personal lives, it inhibits conversation. Students are reluctant to confide in their teachers because they feel that teachers have no understanding of their lives outside of school. The result? Students don't talk to teachers either.

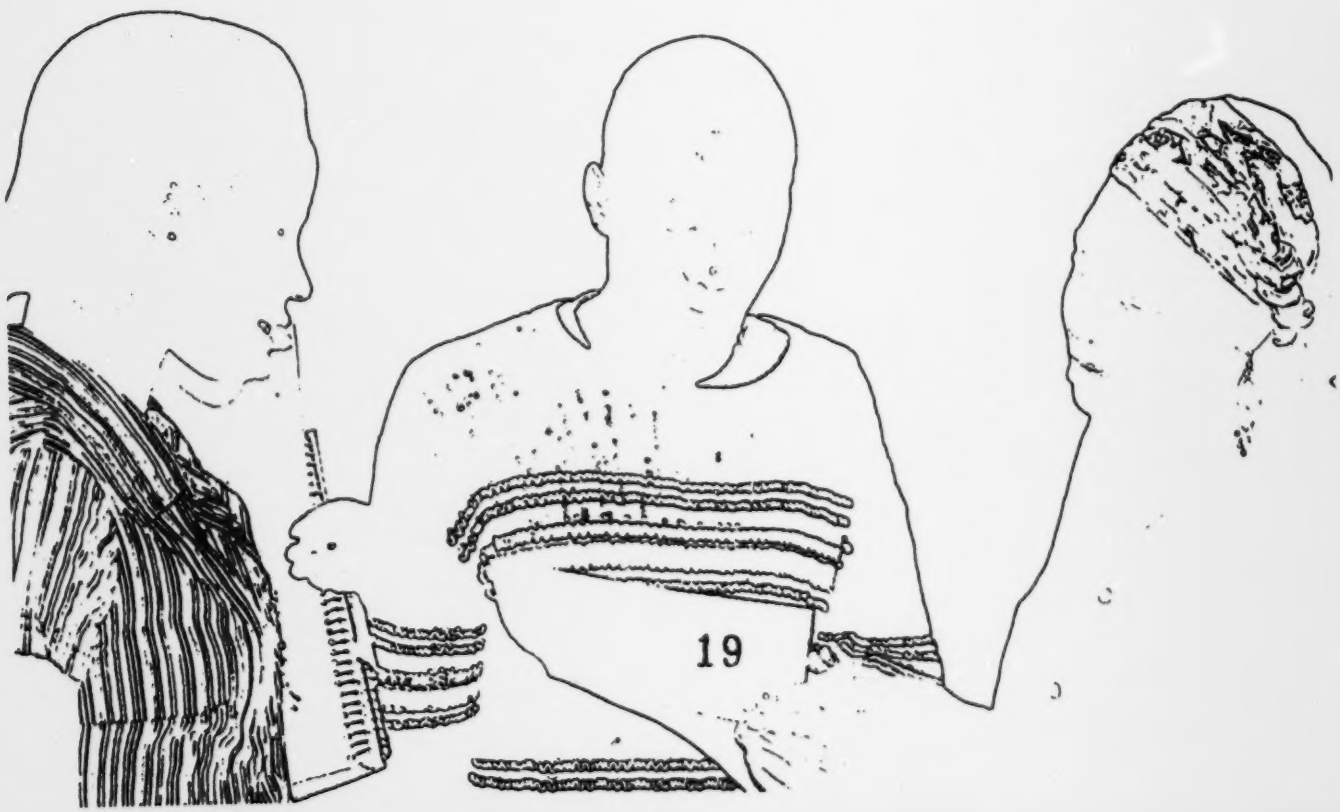
One ninth-grade girl, interviewed for the MetLife Survey 2000, said: "I'd like to get to know my mother and for her to get to know me. She knows nothing about me and I am hurt by that. She doesn't even try to find out what's going on with my life. Sometimes I feel like I need to get into some trouble for her to start paying attention to me."

When family members are informed about what is happening at school on a day-to-day basis and when teachers are familiar with the names and lives of the students' family members, parents and teachers are more apt to feel comfortable and have a lot to say to one another.

Students will welcome parent participation if a student's school and home life are integrated and more in sync, students' family members participate in various aspects of school life, and students understand the value of parents' participating in school.

Consider this!

- Parents who don't speak English might need translated materials.
- Single parents might not have time to become involved at school, or might have night jobs, and need you to be flexible.
- Parents with young children to care for need babysitting available at each school activity. Ask your principal, students, or parents for help.
- Parents who might have had negative experiences in school as children will need to feel welcomed.
- Parents with little education, who might be intimidated by academic matters, will need things explained in words they can understand —without educational jargon!
- Parents who might be afraid to walk the neighborhood at night to attend school events may welcome introductions to other parents who can accompany them.
- Some students are embarrassed when their parents show up at school and might feel more comfortable if you arrange for several parents to show up together.



WHAT ONE TEACHER CAN DO

Be aware of what you are communicating

If parents feel left out and feel that their viewpoints and experience aren't valued, their perceptions about school may influence their children's perceptions. The parents and students may then behave in an anti-school way, disregarding school values and expected behaviors, leading to a decline in achievement and prospects for the future.

It is not uncommon for teachers to live in communities that are very different from ones in which they teach. Unfamiliar patterns of life can be threatening and often can cause feelings of estrangement, fear, and distance. Starting with a respectful attitude builds a foundation for opening up lines of communication. It is essential that teachers let parents know that their ideas are respected and really matter.

Respect for parents requires teacher awareness of what other cultures consider "respectful" behavior. For example, one Polish teacher said that it is considered disrespectful in her country for teachers to wear casual dress, and also for people to refer to anyone as "she" or "he" in that person's presence.

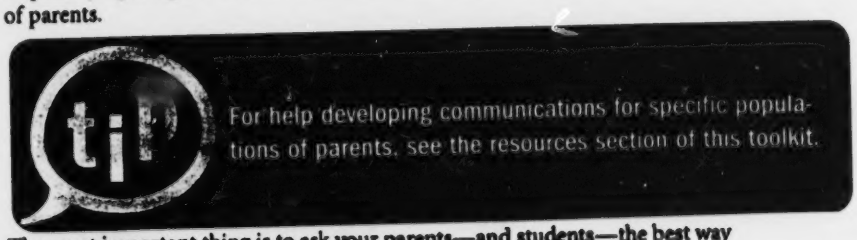
It is important to find out from the parents—or from other teachers or administrators in the school—exactly what a student's lifestyle is like, gain an understanding and respect for it, and build enough of a relationship with the parents to work with them in supporting and working with their child.

Writes one middle school teacher, on *MiddleWeb*'s online chat page:
Unfortunately, families are often treated like we need to teach them a thing or two and that is a far cry from a respectful approach.... Maybe our school staff members need to examine their assumptions about kids and their families before we try to plan the gimmicks we can use to get them out to a meeting.

Join *MiddleWeb*, which has a chat feature for teachers to ask questions of one another and share their experiences.
www.middleweb.com

Many parents—especially low-income parents or those who lack a college degree—feel intimidated in school settings, and feel that what they think doesn't count very much. If a student's family members feel that you don't really respect their ideas or understand their concerns, they may tend to stay out of matters related to school, and become distanced from their child's school life, dreams, and plans.

Many teachers in the upper grades, frustrated by their unsuccessful attempts to involve families, often stop even bothering to send things home. Don't give up! Show your respect by figuring out a form of communication that works for *your* community of parents.


tip
For help developing communications for specific populations of parents, see the resources section of this toolkit.

The most important thing is to ask your parents—and students—the best way to reach families.

One method of communicating respect is to make sure that most of your communications are not just one-way—limited to letting parents know what you and your class are doing. Failure to solicit parents' input can send a message that what parents have to say to teachers is less important than what teachers have to say. One Arizona high school math teacher had this experience:
At my school, I rely on the phone in my classroom because parents can reach me there. A few days ago, the school administration decided—based on a few complaints of too many phone calls—to make our phones "call out only." Now, I am frustrated because family members don't have easy access to me.

To demonstrate respect for parents, make efforts to show that parents are genuinely invited to voice their opinions, visit the class, participate in events, and contact you frequently. A genuine initiation is personalized and requires referring to previous conversations, taking individual needs into account, and treating parents as you would your personal friends. You must be familiar with the parents in order to establish this type of relationship.

One way to get to know the families in your community is to send out a survey at the beginning of the school year to find out about the parents of your students. Use the survey to gather contact information about the parents, or other relatives, or family friends who play a significant role in the family's life. Gather information about family members' interests and needs that might be met by school activities, talents they might contribute to the classroom or to the school, and limitations on time, due to work or other activities. *See TOOL: How I Would Like to Help My Child Succeed, page 25.*

Learn about your community

You will not succeed in recruiting parents to become involved in their children's school experience if you don't make an effort to get to know the community. As one teacher related about her first year:

I was the "Yankee" from Wisconsin, teaching in an 87% Mexican American community. I didn't speak Spanish, was intimidated by the parents, didn't know how to connect with them, and was afraid I'd say something wrong. Once I got to know how to talk to the parents, I felt more comfortable and they started to share things with me.

The more parents feel that you understand their lives, the more you will understand how to engage them, and the more comfortable they will be with you. An important part of the beginning of your school year should be to tour the community to get to know how your kids and their parents live day-to-day. *(See Chapter 4 for more information about getting to know the community.)*

Keep parents in the loop

Unfortunately many parents of teenagers are used to hearing only negative things about their children from their teachers, who often only have time to contact parents if something goes wrong. Communicating with them at the beginning of the school year—before anything negative happens—gives you an opportunity to start on a positive note.

Mail a letter of introduction to parents at the beginning of school to introduce yourself, let parents know how to reach you, find out how to reach them, and welcome them and their child to your class. Acknowledge the family as part of life at school. *See TOOL: Welcoming Parents: Letter of Introduction and Phone Script, page 29.*

Make an initial phone call and try to establish a relationship with each parent. If you are overwhelmed by the number of phone calls you would have to make to reach all the parents, choose parents whom you haven't had any contact with and who you feel might benefit from a call. *See TOOL: Call Plan and Log, page 27.*

At The Fenway School in Boston, teachers report success with calling students' homes and being persistent in reaching families. Before school starts, teachers get a list of students' phone numbers and call to introduce themselves. Each teacher has access to a translator for families who might have difficulty understanding English.

For one student, I have many numbers: her grandmother's work and home, her aunt, her other grandmother, her social worker, and cell phone numbers. Once we're able to meet with families and establish that we are looking out for their kids, they trust us and give us anything we need to keep in touch.

High school teacher

"It's just a matter of changing the context of things because you know the children a little better and you've seen the soccer trophies.... I didn't really understand the neighborhood or the kids and the parents until I walked in their shoes."

(Morse, 2001)

It takes less than 5 minutes to call a parent (or leave a message) with some good news.

Can't reach a parent by phone? One Virginia parent volunteer goes door-to-door to invite parents to school events.

To supplement personal phone calls to parents, ask your principal about purchasing services that offer voice messaging for schools that makes it easy to communicate with all of your parents—with one message—about homework, projects, events, health issues and more. For those parents who have computers and e-mail or Internet access, e-mail is an easy way of initiating conversation and can be used to send notices and other important messages to all of the parents, with just one keystroke. Most local libraries provide free e-mail accounts.

tip

Find out if parents who have had children in the school before—especially new immigrant parents—would be willing to help familiarize new parents with the school.

There are parents who may not have phones or e-mail, who don't always read their mail, or who don't look at bulletin boards. But, as a parenting resource counselor points out: *You can't just rely on one mode of communication. You have to have a multipronged approach to parent involvement that includes phone calls, e-mail, listservs, notices, surveys, and anything else you can think of. All parents are different, they hang out in different places, and receive information in all different ways.*

Many teachers, who are lucky enough to have Internet access, create simple Web sites where they post notices, display student work, and send messages about homework assignments.

tip

If you have Internet access (or can easily get to a local library's computer), go to http://www.myclass.net/ or http://www.teachervision.com/ to create, in a few easy steps, your own class Web site for free, where a parent can get updates on their child's class and communicate with you and other parents via e-mail and discussion boards. Set up a free e-mail account at http://www.myschoolmail.com/login on the Learning Network Web site.

When inviting parents to participate in events or visits, a mass-produced invitation or flyer is not enough. It must be accompanied by a phone call, personal note, face-to-face conversation, or some personal contact, especially for parents whom you rarely see. Treat parents as you would a personal friend—be friendly, sincere, and specific about when you are available, when an event is taking place, or exactly what times you can take phone calls.

You might also want to create newsletters for parents about what is going on in their student's classes. Minnesota's South St. Paul High School Partnership Action Team implemented the *Communications Connections* newsletter to boost communication between home and school. *See TOOL: What to Include in Your Newsletter, page 31.*

Make home visits

Home visits are an effective way to build family trust. Although some families may be reluctant to have visitors from the school—for safety, privacy, and other reasons—most welcome this expression of genuine interest in their child. Home visits may be difficult for some teachers, especially those who teach children who are bused in from different neighborhoods. Visiting homes may also be difficult for new teachers, who are faced with many demands. If you are a new teacher, it might be helpful to ask a more seasoned teacher to accompany you on a few home visits.

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The Summer Home Visit Program begins at the end of the eighth-grade year at Dundalk High School in Baltimore, MD. The high school's teachers and support staff volunteer to telephone and visit each home of the incoming ninth graders over the course of the summer. Teachers, in teams of two, visit with families and bring information about the school. The program is welcomed by the community and parents, who hear about these visits and call to inquire when someone will visit (Salinas, 1999).

Sacramento, CA, raised funds from the Voluntary Integration Program and federal Title I to train teachers in low-performing schools in home visitation. The program for the upper grades, developed by the Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT) Parent/Teacher Project, has one teacher from a team who is designated to collect information from other team members for a home visit. The goal of the home visit is to develop a relationship with parents. Teachers receive a stipend for their efforts and prepare a packet of information and a list of frequently asked questions to leave with parents (Francis, 2000).

"You have to walk around and see kids playing. If you don't, you ca make the wrong assumptions about what is going on. Teachers who don't make home visits ofte write off kids."

Texas middle school teacher

tip
• Make a phone call before a visit to find a convenient time for a parent and be respectful of their schedules.
• Mail or send appointment cards home for a reminder.

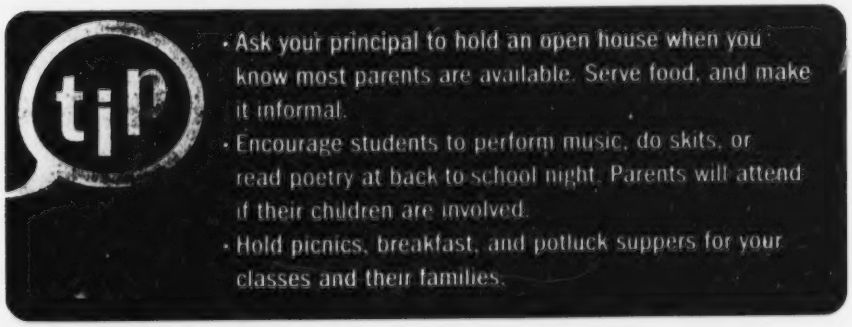
"Hire" a parent liaison

If possible, hire a parent—either on a volunteer or paid basis—to help you communicate with parents and free you to concentrate on building relationships with families. A volunteer liaison can schedule meetings for teachers at parents' homes, organize carpools for families to attend events, telephone families, and work to encourage parent activities at home and at school.

The 2000 Boston Committee Report on family and community engagement recommended assigning parent coordinators/liaisons to help with outreach efforts to parents and to determine what the needs of parents and families may be. Visit http://boston.k12.ma.us/info/task_force.asp to read the full report.

Make school events count

The typical back-to-school nights, open houses, or other informational events in a middle or high school, where parents hear about the PTA and then go to an abbreviated, 15-minute version of a student's schedule, are not as productive as they can be. Most of these events are confusing; parents and teachers meet as strangers, and parents often listen passively to rules and procedures, which often have negative undertones. It is understandable that parents would not be yearning to come back to school for more.


tip
• Ask your principal to hold an open house when you know most parents are available. Serve food, and make it informal.
• Encourage students to perform music, do skits, or read poetry at back to school night. Parents will attend if their children are involved.
• Hold picnics, breakfast, and potluck suppers for your classes and their families.

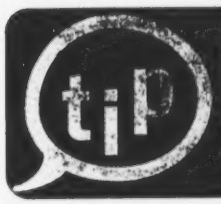
The First Day Foundation is a nonprofit organization devoted to increasing parental involvement and community support for education. *The First Day Newsletter* is free to schools and offers planning tips to stimulate greater family involvement in education throughout the year. Contact them by phone: (802) 447-9625, e-mail: firstday@sover.net, or visit their Web site at www.firstday.org.

You can use school-sponsored events to get to know families and let them know you. It is likely that parents are very interested in finding out about who you are as a person, how inspired you are about the kids and the subject matter, and how you will play a major role in leading their children to successful lives and careers. For back-to-school night, or another event, bring photos of your own family and talk about your approach to teaching, your schooling, and your feelings about teaching. Encourage questions and set up individual meeting times, regular "office" hours when families can reach you, and use any time left to chat informally with parents.

Make the most of your parent conferences

Even if you don't have many scheduled events at which you can communicate with families, you at least probably have parent conferences. Unfortunately, this meeting is sometimes the only communication with parents and it often focuses on bad news. Teachers, often highly skilled at communicating with children, can be less comfortable when interacting with parents and may inadvertently discourage two-way communication. Both parties, fearing being judged, set up a relationship that is not conducive to working together.

Some teachers involve parents by inviting them to participate in developing, evaluating, and scoring portfolios.



Keep in mind, one of the most important strategies for making conferences productive is to report problems to families when they happen—don't wait for a parent conference.

A parent conference can (and should) be an opportunity to learn as much about the student as possible; find out how to communicate with that particular child; discuss the child's potential, progress, and challenges; come to agreement about realistic plans for the student's future; and develop a plan for the student together. If you have an ongoing, informal relationship with parents from the start of school, parent conferences are likely to be more comfortable—an extension of your relationship.

When meeting with parents, there are strategies that can help avoid uncomfortable conversations. *See TOOL: Avoiding Impasse, page 35.*

Student portfolios, which can be presented to parents, provide one way to ensure that parent conferences are filled with meaningful communication that encourages a shared and realistic view of a student's progress.

Linda Beardsley, from Tufts University, says:
The portfolio is much more than a scrapbook. It is really a collection with reflection. It is a record of accomplishment and can be used to showcase what a student has learned and also can be used for college entrance interviews and future jobs. The portfolio is not just a collection of assignments, but tells a story—the student's story. Teachers can help students reflect upon their learning, develop a theme, and plan which artifacts to include. The goal is to be organized in some way so that a wider audience—which includes parents—understands what the student did and why.

One ninth grader at Miami Senior High School, who is interested in becoming a teacher, put together an online portfolio demonstrating how he explored the teaching profession by leading classes and teaching peers. He illustrated and typed his portfolio—to present to his parents and teacher—which includes an autobiography, an essay on favorite school experiences and least favorite school experiences, lesson plans, tests, journal entries, evaluations by peers and teachers, and a rationale for why certain things were included in the portfolio.

Student-led conferences don't require additional time. Have students prepare for the student portfolio presentation as part of an in-class assignment, or homework.

Have you ever considered having a student-led conference? Such conferences invite students, parents, and teachers to engage in open and honest dialogue, encourage students to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance, and facilitate the development of organizational and communication skills. In addition, student conferences have been found to increase parent attendance.

In the middle and high school years, when critical educational decisions are made, it is essential that parents and teachers encourage students to share with them how and why they think and behave in certain ways, and what their goals are for the future. Student-led conferences are an effective way to open up lines of communication.
See TOOL: Student-Led Conference, page 33.

Student-led conferences are a refreshing change from the previous "herding" of parents through the school cafeteria, where they would wait in lines for a quick rundown of their child's grades. I often found it difficult to keep straight which parents came for which child.

Kansas middle school teacher
(from *Middle Matters*, fall 1998)

* * *

Communication is the cornerstone of home-school partnerships. By getting to know and feel comfortable with families, learning how to communicate effectively, and welcoming parents as part of the education process, you give each child the best chance for success.

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

How I would like to help my child succeed

One way to get to know families and demonstrate respect for what parents think is to send out a survey at the beginning of the school year. Ask parents or other relatives or friends who play a significant role in the family's life to provide you with this information about themselves.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

My child: _____

Contact information for me:

home:
work:
cell:

If I can't be reached, please call:

name:
relationship:
phone:
2nd phone:

The best time to reach me is:

My child also has a sibling (or siblings) in the school:

name:
grade:

name:
grade:

tool continued on back ➪

My child's interests and talents are:

Things that would help my child adjust to school are:

- ○ I would be interested in meeting the parents of students in my child's class so we can get to know one another.
- ○ I can participate in a carpool with other parents for school events.
- ○ I would be willing to help organize an event for class parents.
- ○ I would be more likely to come to an event if:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

- ○ Please share the information on this survey with other parents.
- ○ Please do not share the information on this survey with other parents.

Call plan and log

Use this form to plan for and keep track of your phone conversations with parents. Plan the call before you make it to help keep it short and to the point. If it is a criticism of the student or you are going to talk about a problem, make sure to start with two or three positive comments.

Teacher: _____

Student: _____

Call to: _____

Relation to student: _____

Date: _____

Main issue to discuss:

Parent's comments about the situation (background, suggestions, opinions):

Positive comments to start the conversation:

Solution/next steps:

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

Welcoming parents: Letter of introduction and phone script

Introducing yourself in a letter or phone call at the beginning of school sets an open, friendly tone for future contact. Use these samples to create messages for parents.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

Dear Parents,

I am very excited to be working with your child this year and would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and let you know what you can expect in your child's science class. I graduated from the University of Massachusetts with a major in biology and a minor in chemistry. I finished my master's degree in education at Northeastern University. This will be my third year of teaching science at Bountiful High School.

Because of the excellent science teachers I've had in my own education, I am committed to hands-on learning and to helping my students think like scientists. I also believe strongly in clear writing. My students should not only know the information well, they should be able to communicate it as effectively as they can.

Please feel free to contact me at any time during the year to discuss your child's progress in my class or simply to chat. I strongly believe that open lines of communication between teachers and parents contribute to students' success.

I look forward to meeting you at the open house in October.

Sincerely yours,

Name
Address
Phone (and hours you can be reached)
E-mail address

Phone Script:

Hello, my name is _____. I am your son's/daughter's science teacher and I'm calling to introduce myself. I am looking forward to getting to know _____ (student's name) and will be sending you some materials about what we are going to do in class this year.

Please feel free to contact me any time during the year to discuss your child's progress or simply to chat. I firmly believe that getting your help and input makes me a better teacher. Is there anything in particular you want me to know about your child? Do you have any questions you want to ask me about my class or the school?

I look forward to meeting you soon.

Adapted from scripts by Eileen Chen, teacher at The Fenway School (Boston, MA)

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

What to include in your newsletter, flyer, or Web site for parents

Below is a menu of items to choose from as you put together a newsletter, flyer, or Web site for parents to encourage them to become more informed and more involved in their children's education. Select the ideas you like best, but remember to keep it short.

Remember the "30'3'30" rule in developing school newsletters. Eighty percent of people will spend just 30 seconds reading it. Nineteen percent will spend three minutes. One percent will spend 30 minutes (your mother!).

From *68 Parent Involvement Ideas That Really Work*, The Parent Institute

- **What's happening when?**
  A calendar of events for the month
- **What do you think of this?**
  Get your parents' opinions about a few classroom issues
- **Teacher talk**
  Message from you about a classroom activity
- **Parent talk**
  Message, opinion, or news from a parent
- **Student talk**
  Message, opinion, or news from a student
- **Parenting tips (written by students, teachers, and/or parents)**
  How to help your teenager with homework
  How to talk to your teenager so he/she will listen
  Activities you can do together
  How to make the most of a conference with a teacher
- **Community news**
  Information about job fairs, college fairs, etc.
- **Get involved!**
  Suggestions for how parents can become involved in school
- **Awards**
  Who won what
- **Summer jobs/college fairs, etc.**
  News that affects students' future choices
- **Student drawing or photo**

Helping parents support schoolwork at home

3

I teach math in a middle school in Saint Louis, in which 100% of the students are African American. At the beginning of each year, I interview each student about their home life and interests, and then develop strategies to—with the help of his or her parents—assist the student academically. In general, my approach to education is through developing interesting, real-life, hands-on situations in which students and parents can work together. We began an entrepreneurial project where the students were able to explore issues, firsthand, about raising capital, supply and demand, interest rates, inventory management, attaining profit, and contributing profits to charities. Daily attendance improved because students were so involved that they would not stay home from school. As students began to talk to their parents about the project, parents became more interested and involved with school and started calling and visiting, and talking with their children about school.
Jerry Cannon, Saint Louis, MO

KEY ISSUES

- Efforts parents make at home can impact their child's achievement.
- Parents of teenagers are less involved with school than are parents of elementary school children, but their involvement is just as important.
- Parents of adolescents have much to contribute to their children's learning, but need to know how to participate.
- One teacher can make a difference by defining roles for parents, helping parents assist their children with work at home, and creating activities that involve parents in student work and school events.

Coming together to guide student success

4

I work in a school that serves mostly poor, immigrant children—Hispanic, Polish, Bosnian, and Asian. These kids don't really connect their futures with school yet.... It isn't real to them at this age. But we've tried to make kids and parents think about the next steps. I encourage kids to talk about who they are and what they want to become. When I was a new teacher, I wasn't really brave or comfortable enough to call parents, but now, after ten years of teaching, I really see that I have to get to know the parents in order to get to know the children. I act as a resource and steer parents towards others in the school or community who can help. I try to make families feel comfortable with the school and with me so we can work as partners for the children.
Mariola Pik, Chicago, IL

KEY ISSUES

- Students and the adults in their lives often have conflicting hopes, dreams, and plans for the student's future.
- Regardless of their increasingly adult appearance, teenagers still need guidance.
- Helping teens develop the resources necessary for setting and meeting their goals depends on trust and collaboration among parents, teachers, and other school professionals.
- School personnel can act as resources for the teacher to help guide students.
- Students and parents need help laying out the steps to take to reach college and career goals.
- One teacher can make a difference by connecting middle and high school experiences to the future, and rallying the human and other resources necessary to guide students to the best choices for a college and career.

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Involvement wanes in upper grades

As academic subjects become more advanced and the child grows older, parent involvement in homework activities typically recedes, along with parent involvement generally. As one former guidance counselor from an urban school regretfully observed:
After fifth grade, the parents just disappear.

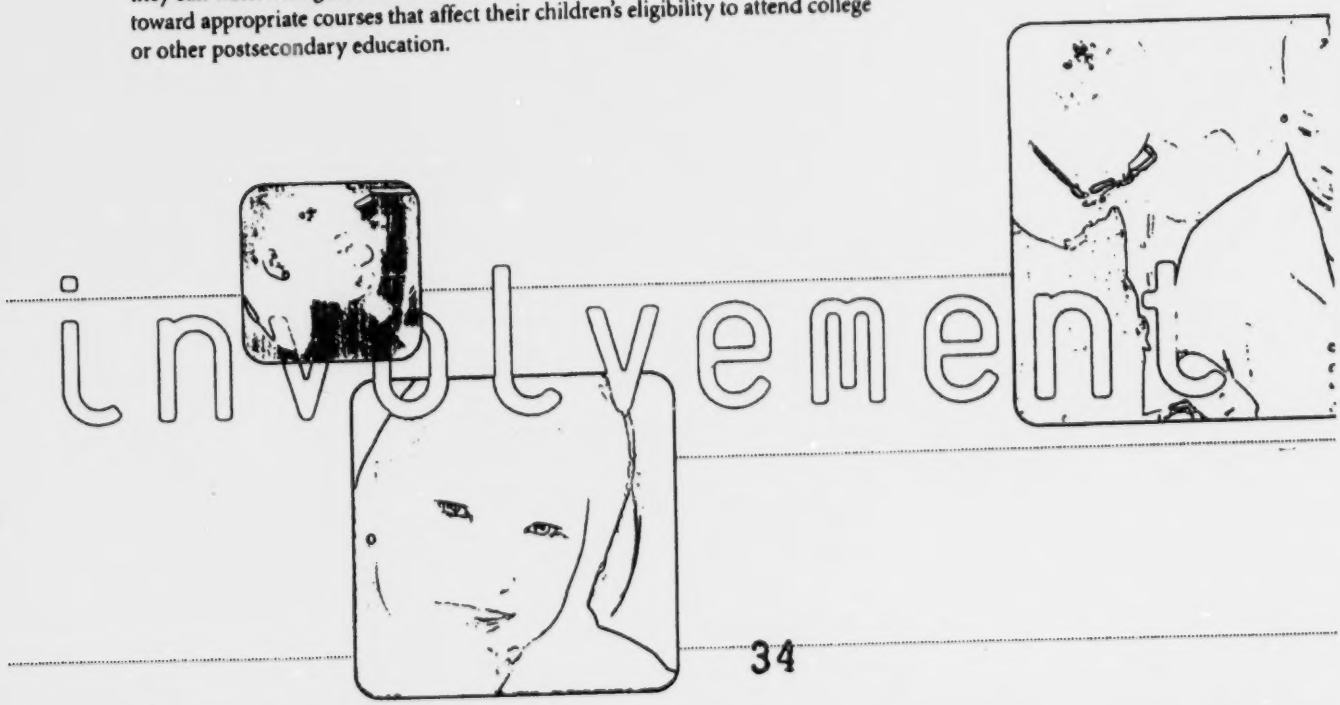
> **Research shows...**
> **Sixty-four percent of elementary school parents reported that they help their child with homework "very often." That number plummeted to 14% with parents of older children.** (Henderson and Wilcox, 1998)

It is a challenge to balance the need for adolescent independence and the need for adult support. How can teachers of older children overcome this waning parental involvement with their children's schoolwork and learning, and why bother trying to get parents involved in the first place?

Parental involvement leads to learning

There are four major reasons why it is important to help parents have greater awareness of what their kids are doing in school and why teachers should work to increase parental involvement in student schoolwork.

- When parents help their kids with homework or take opportunities to teach their children explicitly, they serve as role models for their children. Children are more likely to want to learn if they witness their parents taking learning seriously.
- In many cases, parents are more capable than teachers of reinforcing school learning because they can deal with their own children on a one-on-one basis, unlike a teacher who must teach to a whole class.
- Parents may simply know their child better than the teacher. They may, often, be able to find teaching strategies that work for their own child more reliably than can the student's teacher.
- If parents know what their children are studying and how well they are doing, they can work with guidance counselors and teachers to steer their children toward appropriate courses that affect their children's eligibility to attend college or other postsecondary education.



Parents need guidance in providing homework help

Research shows...
Direct parental instruction of their own children at home positively affects school achievement, but parents need specific information on how to help and what to do to help their children directly with instruction.
(Morton-Williams, 1964)

If teachers want their students to learn more effectively, there may be no better tutors for students than their own parents. Yet, parents may be unfamiliar with what role they should take regarding their teenager's schoolwork. So, along with teaching students what they must learn, teachers must be prepared to educate parents about how students learn and how they, as parents, can best become facilitators of that learning.

Assigning homework that relates to family life, that can involve siblings, parents, and your students, is a good way to help build home-school connections. In addition, holding classes for parents, where the subject you are teaching is explained in everyday language, will help parents connect to the work their children bring home. Informing parents about assignments, explaining their purpose, and obtaining parent signatures on homework are ways to help keep parents involved.

It's the parental support that really matters

Research shows...
In a yearlong study of 700 middle schoolers whose families had little formal education, researcher Joyce Epstein found that when teachers required students to talk with a family member about their language arts homework, the students earned higher grades and became more enthusiastic writers.

It is understandable that many parents may be daunted by what their teenage children are learning. After all, with the current emphasis on high standards subject matter—especially in math and science—what older kids are learning can be challenging and beyond what many parents know, or remember, from their own school days.

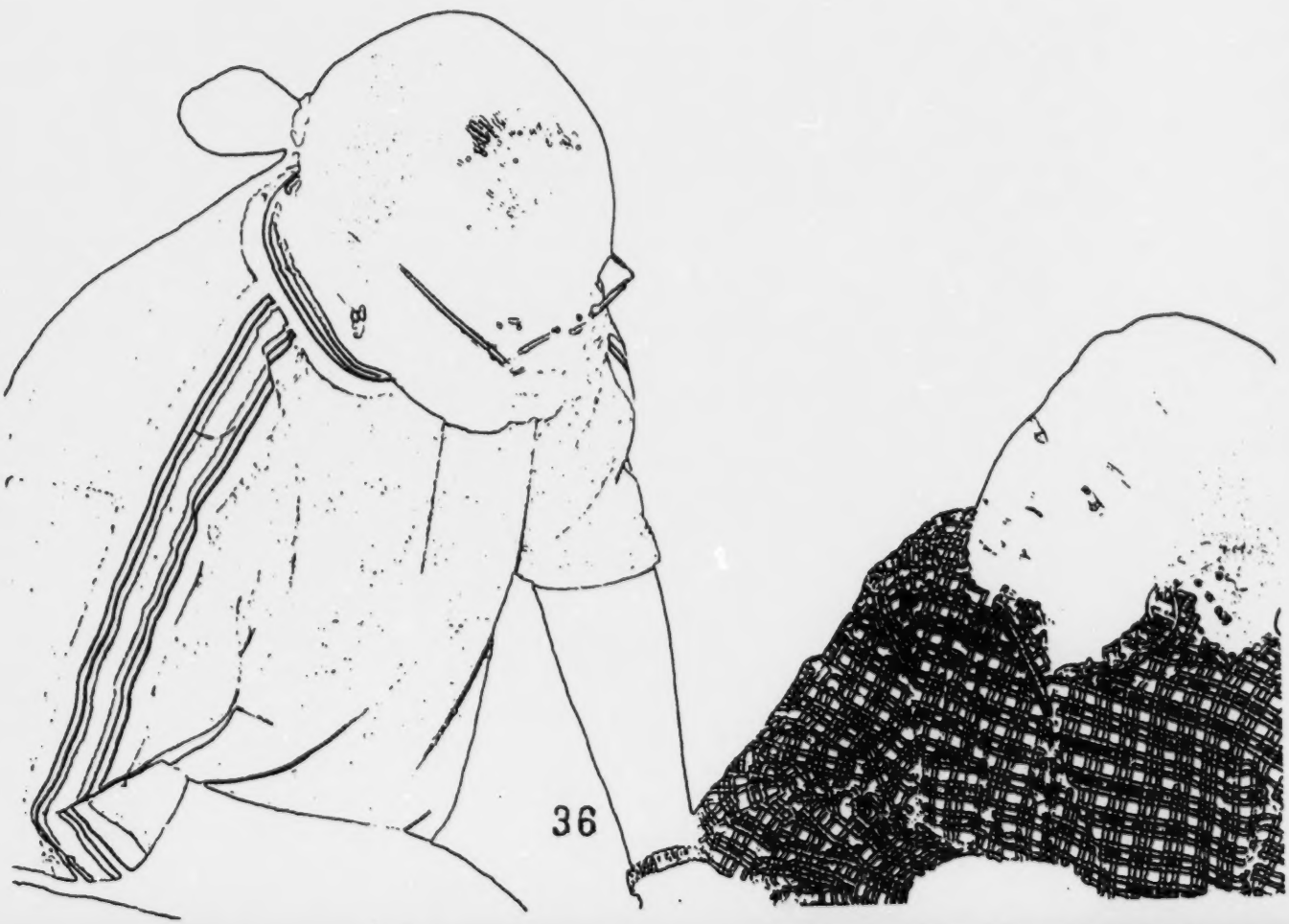
It may be reassuring for parents to know that the support for learning that parents exhibit to their children, not necessarily parents' input into the subject-matter details of assignments, is the key to helping children achieve. Attending museums, watching an educational program on TV together, talking about family history, or even shopping at the grocery store can also enhance student learning.

One teacher said:
I know that simple things help kids know their parents support their learning. I call the parents when their child gets an A on a test and ask them if they might do something special for their child as a reward, if they can.

Parents may not help students explicitly learn, for example, how to conjugate French verbs or analyze the causes for the War of 1812. But by involving themselves in their children's learning in other ways, they can assert a positive impact on learning by emphasizing its importance and by encouraging their children to achieve academically. The technical term for this type of support is "proximal achievement." Parental involvement in homework has even been shown to help reduce behavior problems at school.

Consider this!

- Only between 15% and 20% of a child's waking hours are spent in school. Learning that takes place at home is equally if not more important to a child's future as in-school learning.
- Students who spend their out-of-school hours in constructive learning activities do better in school.
- Some cultures don't support parental involvement in schoolwork and may need to understand the importance of helping with work at home.
- Parents who don't help with homework may need assistance with written English, either by helping translate and/or connecting parents with other parents from their culture or ethnic group.
- Many parents have time constraints, due to work or other activities, and need ideas for activities to do with children that don't require a lot of their time.



WHAT ONE TEACHER CAN DO

Clarify roles and responsibilities

Research shows...
Teacher invitations for more parental involvement in homework are one of the key reasons why parents get involved...and teacher invitations are more influential in encouraging that involvement than other factors, including the socioeconomic status of the parents. (Dauber & Epstein, 1993)

Teachers need to explain that asking for parental assistance with homework is not a matter of shirking their own responsibility as teachers, but a proven technique for helping kids learn better. Many secondary school parents consider themselves primarily responsible for their child's learning. However, teachers often feel it is their sole responsibility, and adolescents often feel that their work is their own business!

It is important for you, your parents, and your students to understand that you work as a team, all sharing the responsibility for student learning. Your role as a teacher is to help parents understand the importance of working as a team, assist them in working with their children at home, and take the lead in facilitating teamwork. *See TOOL: 11 Reasons Parents and Students Need to Do Schoolwork Together, page 45.*

Parents can help students grasp specific concepts and remember facts, and they also can help by talking to their children about school, and structuring the environment—both physical and emotional—so learning can best take place. And, students need to understand the importance of letting their parents be a part of their world at school.

To begin with, you can communicate to parents (by phone, e-mail, newsletter, or flyer) that it is important to:

- Secure a protected space for their child to work in that is away from noise and other distractions (at home, at the local library, or at community centers).
- Assist their children in developing strong work habits by setting schedules for homework completion and checking to be sure it is finished and passed in on time.
- Support their children emotionally through difficult assignments by listening to their concerns, encouraging them through positive statements of their abilities, and helping them devise strategies for overcoming obstacles.

While many schools have handbooks to acquaint parents with school regulations and procedures, few of these outline positive ways to involve families in what students are learning. One way to encourage parents to take an active role in their children's academic lives is to develop handouts explaining how parents can help their children succeed in the class. *See TOOL: What to Expect in My Class, page 47.*

Help parents understand homework assignments

It is important to share with parents the purpose and content of assignments that you require students to do at home. Parents often are aware of and support the basic goals of homework—reinforcing learning and developing work habits, for example—but are often uninformed about the objectives of particular assignments. Asked if they would be more involved if they understood these goals, parents generally answer in the affirmative. Informing parents, getting their input, and ensuring they understand deadlines and requirements might help to avoid the parental nagging that often takes place in households with adolescents, who may not be forthcoming with parents about what teachers expect from them.

"I wish there were some way I could check on homework...but how do you get to the teachers? They should really all have e-mail and check their messages every day. I would love to know when there are tests and what the assignments are, but the teachers say that they don't have money for postage and copying, and they don't have e-mail."

New York City parent

It takes just a few minutes to call parents of students who have trouble turning in homework to find out how you can help the child get his/her homework completed.

tip

- Create a win-win situation. One school in Massachusetts that works with kids with learning problems provides a model for dealing with high school students who don't turn in homework. Instead of a punitive approach, the teacher gets the parent's permission to work with the child (or a small group of kids) after school for a half hour and help them succeed in completing their homework.
- Set up a Web site for parents. In Forsyth County, GA, the schools have developed a Web site where parents can log on to find out everything from the achievement standards for Georgia's state exams to the topic and due date of their child's next term paper. To see how it works, visit http://www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/schools/common/PCXPabout.pdf.
- Bring in a parent liaison to inform a classroom full of parents about the importance of becoming involved. Have a group of designated parents make calls to other parents regarding relevant dates and assignments.

Develop contracts with parents and students

A strategy that has been growing in popularity over the past few years is to have student, teacher, and parent agree to and sign a contract that binds each to certain expected behaviors. For example, teachers can agree to inform parents and students as clearly and as regularly as possible about due dates of various assignments and tests. Parents, meanwhile, can agree to ensure that their child completes homework and that they provide sufficient support for the completion of the work. Students can be required to inform their parents of what they are learning and any difficulties they are having.

This triangular accountability system stresses to parents and students that student learning is of primary importance to the teacher, and that the teacher needs the cooperation of both students and parents to make this learning possible.

See TOOL: Contract for Middle and High School Teachers, Parents, and Students, page 49.

Assign homework that involves parents

No matter where you and the parents of your students stand on the current debates about the benefits and drawbacks of homework, you should make whatever you give as work-at-home a positive experience. If you make it clear to students and their parents that homework is one way to bridge the gap between home and school, rather than a punishment for not learning enough at school, parents might be more inclined to treat homework as a three-way partnership to promote learning.

The parents, teachers, and administrators of all 11 million children in Title I schools—those that serve the nation's high-povert schools—are required to sign "compacts" that typically stipulate among other things, how many hours parents will work with their children each week.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Our parents are very cooperative. Part of it is that they're being consulted as important experts about their children; part of it is that even though their kids are now in junior high, they understand that their kids still need their help."

Los Angeles middle school teacher

tip

Rather than giving nightly homework assignments, assign a certain amount of homework to be completed over a one- or two-week period. The longer time span can allow for both more substantial projects and for less pressure every night for students to complete homework. And, it can give busy parents adequate time to schedule the way they help their children.

One way to ensure that students seek their parents' help on homework assignments is to make the assignment about their parents. Require projects that can be completed only with parents' input. Having students write an autobiography or an essay on what life may have been like 30 years ago is a convenient way to make parents the context of the work. Develop a "The Day I Was Born" project and have students research what was happening in the world on their birthday, and ask their parents, older siblings, and other relatives what they remember about the day.

For math or science work, students might be assigned the task of working with parents to calculate their weekly family calorie intake or the percentage of time the family spends on recreational activities.

The students were to ask their parents to go with them to the mall, find a 15% discount clothing rack, and calculate the price of items on sale.

Saint Louis middle school math teacher

Another possibility for an assignment is to have students write an essay on something they want to know more about, such as careers, or local politics. Parents should be involved with the project, not only to help their children formulate their ideas, but, more importantly, to become more aware of their own child's interests and talents.
See TOOL: A Homework Assignment to Involve Parents, page 51.

tip

Suggest online activities for families with computers. Or, arrange to get them together online at school.

Suggest an online trip together. NASA Oceanography provides online field trips about the ocean. See http://oceans.nasa.gov/learn/index.html.

History & Politics Out Loud offers a collection of audio materials that capture significant political and historical events and personalities of the 20th century—such as speeches and private phone conversations conducted from the White House. See http://www.hpol.org.

Develop checklists

Like any task, studying is a process, and must be undertaken in certain conditions and in a certain order. One way to make this process more concrete and definite is to develop a generic checklist for assignments, so that parents can know exactly what needs to be done and how well the student has performed the task. The checklist might ask specific questions about what the student should pay attention to, in what order certain tasks should be undertaken, and how long each part of the assignment should take.

For the most substantial assignments, have students pass in project timelines, with parents' signatures. Checklists are helpful in getting students organized and in informing parents, in concrete ways, how they might intercede as facilitators. Checklists are also useful for parents who want to help but aren't sure where to start. *See TOOL: Homework Checklist, page 53.*

Hold curriculum nights for parents

Talk with your principal about holding a special gathering of parents within the first couple of months of the school year to demonstrate and explain what the students are learning. This may work especially well in the areas of math or science, where subject matter may be less familiar or accessible to the general parent population. Parents can be given the chance to hear about what the students are learning, via a lecture or a similar kind of presentation, and to engage in some work themselves, with the teacher(s) —and even the students—acting as coaches.

One high school teacher said:
We were switching from a traditional math curriculum to one called "everyday math." Assignments are more open-ended and there is more focus on critical thinking. Parents were unfamiliar with this and became frustrated trying to help their kids. We put together a math night and re-created the math class for them so the parents could see—hands-on—what their kids were doing.

To encourage attendance at an event like this may take a good deal of personal contact and persuasion from the teacher, as parents may be intimidated by learning the specifics of what their children are learning. Talk with your principal about holding a potluck supper at school beforehand, or ask a parent to help you arrange one at someone's home or elsewhere in the community. Be sure to provide babysitting for parents with younger children. And, invite the whole family.

Approach a local fast food restaurant and ask if they might provide free sodas, burgers, or other food to families before a school event. Many of these restaurants are eager to become involved in their community by supporting school efforts.

Talk to parents about adolescence

Says one teacher from Utah:
We're trying to get the parents involved in ways that the kids don't feel is intrusive. That's difficult for some of the kids who are really rebelling.

Almost all teachers and parents of adolescents lament the tension that emerges from the natural process of adolescents' developing their own identities and separating themselves from the family. Adults often accuse teenagers of living in a world of their own, and this often is exactly the way many kids like it.

But, children who have consistency in their lives are more likely to do well in school. If parents and teachers work together, they can agree on consistent approaches to homework, methods of dealing with socially unacceptable behavior, and other matters.

And, adolescents need their parents. Interviews with teenagers reveal that many teenagers would like their parents to be more involved with them. The bottom line: Even when teenagers appear to be pushing their parents away, they still need them to be an integral part of their lives.

Helping parents with their children is a tricky business for teachers. As in all interactions with parents, it is especially complicated when you are unfamiliar with the cultures and child-rearing priorities and practices of the families in your school community. In many cases, culture may determine how people discipline their teenagers, what rules they enforce, how much freedom they allow, and how high their academic expectations are for their children. There is often tension around what parents think teachers should be doing and what teachers feel that parents should or should not do. So, what is your business, as a teacher?

Says one twelfth-grade boy:
"I wish that they would really care about how I do in school. All they do is see my report card and tell me I could do better if the grade isn't a 100. They could help me with my homework. They could make sure I do my homework. Anything really."
(MetLife Survey 2000)

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

Student-led conference: How do I see myself?

Have the student who will lead the parent conference fill out his/her form beforehand, and come prepared to discuss the ratings at the conference.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Class: _____

Give yourself: a **1 for NEVER**, a **2 for SELDOM**, a **3 for FREQUENTLY**, or a **4 for ALWAYS**.

	1	2	3	4
Quality worker				
I work successfully as a team member.	—	—	—	—
I produce quality projects, assignments, or performances.	—	—	—	—
I meet due dates/deadlines.	—	—	—	—
I go above and beyond.	—	—	—	—
Effective communicator				
I effectively communicate thoughts and ideas.	—	—	—	—
I make positive contributions to lessons/discussions.	—	—	—	—
I deal with problems, arguments, or disputes in a positive way.	—	—	—	—
Lifelong learner				
I know whom to ask for help and information.	—	—	—	—
I know how to find and use a variety of resources.	—	—	—	—
I am flexible and creative when necessary.	—	—	—	—
Responsible citizen				
I demonstrate personal responsibility for attitude, actions, words, and work.	—	—	—	—
I follow rules and directions.	—	—	—	—
I make a positive contribution to the classroom and community.	—	—	—	—
I demonstrate respect and understanding for myself and others.	—	—	—	—
Perceptive thinker				
I demonstrate knowledge and interest in the world and current events.	—	—	—	—
I use knowledge and creativity to solve problems.	—	—	—	—
I think beyond the obvious.	—	—	—	—
Self-directed individual				
I show maturity and responsibility by making healthy, safe, and wise choices.	—	—	—	—
I set goals and follow through with them.	—	—	—	—
I start work, stay on task, and complete the assignment without being reminded or prompted.	—	—	—	—

Developed by Frisbie Middle School in Rialto, CA: www.rialto.k12.ca.us/frisbie/coyote/see.myself.html

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

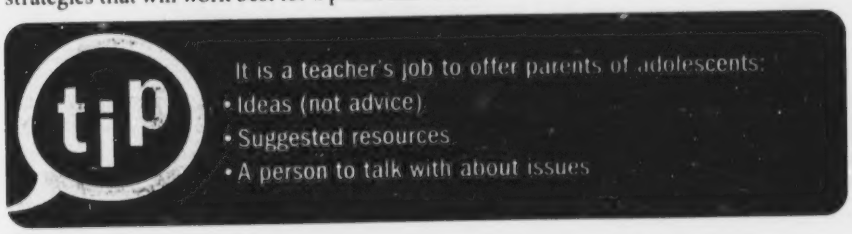
Avoiding Impasse

Use this tool to make the most of discussions with parents.

- ○ Wait until a **face-to-face** meeting—try not to discuss the problem on the telephone. If possible, ask the parent to sit next to you (as opposed to across from you) while you discuss the issue. Not only does this make you less intimidating, it encourages an angry person to speak slower.
- ○ **Listen** to the parent's point of view. When you meet with the parent, ask about his/her concerns and listen carefully, both to what is said and the feelings behind it.
- ○ Listening includes the use of empathetic **body language** to try to put the parent at ease: keep consistent, friendly eye contact, relax your posture, and nod encouragingly. Don't interrupt, and when you do speak, speak in a normal tone of voice.
- ○ Find out **how the parent sees** the situation—find out everything you can—about their experiences with similar situations (if any), their level of frustration, and previous attempts to address problems and their results. Try asking the following questions to help clarify what is bothering the parent:
  - ➪What is it you are angry about?
  - ➪What do you need me to do?
  - ➪What should happen after this conversation?
- ○ Make sure you **don't judge** the parent. Be as open as possible to what the parent is saying and do not be defensive or lay blame. Try not to be invested in "being right." Even if you disagree with the parent, be sure to acknowledge his or her feelings.
- ○ **Be clear** when describing or summarizing the situation. It might help to give some context about what other students are doing, or which school policies and requirements are relevant to the situation.
- ○ Try to find some way to **agree**. At least agree to observe the situation for another week. Make an appointment to meet and talk again (keep in mind that time often allows both you and the parent to reflect and perhaps alter your views).
- ○ Arrange to have a **third party** (a colleague or administrator) present at your meeting to help guide and mediate the conversation if you anticipate an especially difficult or hostile situation (this person can also help you process what happened afterwards).
- ○ After a negative exchange with a parent, **reflect** on the experience, what could have triggered the anger, what you could have done differently (or might do differently the next time), and how you may have contributed to a parent's behavior or opinion. Write it all down.
- ○ **Apologize** if you have said something that inflamed the situation, something that was misconstrued, or if you misunderstood the parent or the situation.
- ○ **Don't take it personally** when parents express anger or hostility. Remember that parents may have been struggling with their adolescents for a long time, and may have reached the end of their ropes—they may lash out at you in frustration.

Adapted from Braun, L., Swap, S. (1986). *Home-School Partnerships*, Wheelock College *and, Handling Other's Anger,* on the Professional Resources page of the Idaho Education Association's Web site (www.idahoea.org).

Work as a partner with the parents (and students) to share information, offer insight and ideas, and work to develop a relationship conducive to deciding together the strategies that will work best for a particular child.


tip
It is a teacher's job to offer parents of adolescents:
• Ideas (not advice)
• Suggested resources
• A person to talk with about issues

Don't forget the value of linking parents to other parents. Some schools encourage parents to get together to discuss the challenges of raising an adolescent. Shaker Heights High School in Ohio, for example, formed a parent group at 8:00 a.m. in the school library to remedy the isolation that many parents of teens experience.

* * *

While there certainly are barriers to involving parents in teenagers' schoolwork at home, there are proven advantages that will make your efforts worthwhile. Taking on your role to define parents' responsibilities, enhance communication, develop contracts, hold activities, and make efforts to help parents with their teenagers will further a relationship with parents and students and build a team focused on student success.

It takes just a few minutes to call two involved parents to see if they would be interested in starting an informal discussion group around adolescent issues. You can help parents find a location and some background material to read. For a start, print out material and refer parents to Web sites that will help them with their adolescents: for example, http://www.parentinstitute.com and http://www.parentingteens.com

11 reasons parents and students need to do schoolwork together

Send this home to communicate to parents that their involvement is important, and to communicate to students that there is a good reason for their parents to be involved with their schoolwork.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

1. Parents can be the ones who can make the home environment more "learning friendly," which can make it easier for students to complete assignments.

2. Students spend most of their time outside of school, so parents can have a significant influence over teenagers' behaviors and attitudes toward homework and school learning. Parents' positive attitudes can be contagious.

3. Parent involvement in learning can provide teenagers with the individual attention they need from an adult to guide them in important decisions about college and careers.

4. Teenagers can practice how to plan, structure their work environment, and complete assignments when they share ideas about school with their parents.

5. Since, when they grow up, children tend to imitate some of their parents' behaviors, parents can model effective studying behaviors and attitudes toward school.

6. Parents know their children's learning styles and preferences best, and may be able to help their children learn in ways that teachers cannot.

7. Research has shown that when parents are involved in school matters, children have a better chance of performing better in school.

8. Children of all ages do best when they have consistency in discipline and attitudes toward learning. Parents can reinforce what is being taught at school.

9. If parents are knowledgeable about what is going on in school, they can help students figure out how to navigate the social and academic challenges the student is facing.

10. Parents can make teenagers feel good about themselves by helping them complete assignments. Self-confidence can help kids succeed in school.

11. Parents can convey high expectations for their children, which can contribute to children having high expectations for themselves.

What to expect in my class

Use this checklist and make sure you cover these topics on back-to-school night.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

- ✓ What will be taught in my class
- ✓ What materials students will need in my class
- ✓ What students in my class can expect for homework
- ✓ What parents can do to participate in homework assignments
- ✓ How parents can demonstrate high expectations for their child in this class
- ✓ How I determine grades
- ✓ What standardized tests students will take this year
- ✓ How this class helps to prepare students to take challenging math/science/English etc. each year in high school
- ✓ What a good plan is for future math/science/English etc. classes
- ✓ How parents will know if their child is having trouble in class—and what parents can do about it
- ✓ Available math/science/English tutoring available and how students can sign up
- ✓ How parents can participate in making math/science/English decisions with their child
- ✓ When parents should expect a formal report about their child
- ✓ How parents can schedule a parent-teacher conference
- ✓ What parents can do to help
- ✓ Where parents can reach me and how parents can give me feedback

Adapted from a guide by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics

Contract for middle and high school teachers, parents, and students

Student performance will improve if parents, teachers, and students work as a team. This is a three-way partnership in which each person must assume his or her responsibilities.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

As a parent, I will strive to:	As a teacher, I will strive to:	As a student, I will strive to:
•Believe that my child can learn	•Believe that each child can learn	•Believe that I can learn
•Help my child get to school on time and attend regularly	•Provide quality teaching and leadership	•Ask the teacher questions about the homework
•Volunteer at school and/or provide other support to teachers	•Inform all parents and students about class activities, assignments, events, and achievement levels of students, in a timely, efficient manner	•Take home materials and information needed to complete an assignment
•Require my child to participate in at least one extracurricular activity	•Make my classroom welcoming to parents	•Complete homework in a thorough, legible, and timely manner
•Keep track of my child's progress by meeting, phoning, or contacting the teacher	•Check that homework has been completed and signed by parent/guardian	•Obey classroom rules, and come to class every day, on time
•Attend conferences and visit the classroom	•Respect cultural, racial, and ethnic differences	•Discuss with my parents what I am learning in school
•Take 15 minutes a day to talk to my child about his/her school day	•Hold at least two parent-teacher conferences, offering flexible scheduling	•Respect the cultural differences of other students, their families, and staff
•Try to do something special when my child achieves in school	•Provide activities that account for different student learning styles	•Ask my parents for help with homework
•Provide a quiet place and set aside a specific time for homework	•Have high expectations for myself, my students, and other staff	•Do my best to learn
•Be available to assist with schoolwork	•Seek ways to involve parents in the school program	•Resolve conflicts peacefully
•Sign and return all papers that require a parent's or guardian's signature	•Maintain open lines of communication with students and parents	
•Help my child resolve conflicts in positive, nonviolent ways		
•Respect cultural, racial, and ethnic differences		

Parent

.....

Date

.....

Teacher

.....

Date

.....

Student

.....

Date

.....

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

A homework assignment to involve parents

Here is an example of an interactive assignment designed to get students and parents talking about reading and writing. Students can answer these questions themselves, then use these questions to interview their parents or other family members about family reading habits.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

1. Do your parents encourage you to read?
2. Do you read in bed?
3. Do you read the newspaper every day?
4. Do you write in a journal?
5. What is your favorite book from your childhood?
6. What did you like about it?
7. Was there a book you didn't like? Why didn't you like it?
8. What is the best fiction book you've read in the past two years?
9. What is the best nonfiction book you've read in the past two years?
10. Are there any materials that are hard for you to read?
11. Describe your favorite place to read and write and explain why you like this location.
12. Do you write letters or e-mails to friends and family?
13. Whom do you write to and why?
14. Do you know people who don't read or write?
15. Do you know why they don't?
16. Why do you think reading and writing well is an important skill to have?

Homework checklist

Send this home so that parents and students can determine if the atmosphere at home is conducive to learning.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

Setting

- ○ Does the student have a quiet area in which to work?
- ○ Are the number of possible distractions limited (e.g., telephone calls, television, siblings, etc.)?
- ○ Is the parent available to help the student, if necessary?

Time management

- ○ Has the student informed the parent of the various homework tasks s/he needs to complete?
- ○ Has the student set aside enough time to complete the assignment?
- ○ Has the parent helped the student figure out how to manage time for completion?
- ○ Does the timetable for completion include breaks and unforeseen obstacles?

Process issues

- ○ Does the student understand the assignment?
- ○ Is the student sufficiently motivated to complete the assignment?
- ○ Has the student met any barriers to completing the assignment?
- ○ Has the student discussed these barriers with a parent and has the parent attempted to give the student advice/assistance on how to overcome them?

Emotional support

- ○ Has the parent offered the student sufficient positive encouragement?
- ○ Has the parent crossed the line between encouragement and pressure?
- ○ Has the student expressed his/her frustrations adequately and has the parent encouraged the student to share these frustrations?
- ○ Has the parent helped the student to surmount these frustrations?

Shared perceptions strengthen guidance

Research shows...
Parents, teachers, and students have different ideas about the future. Teenagers' career goals focus on the entertainment industry, while their parents favor the college route, and teachers often predict blue-collar jobs for their students. (MetLife Survey 2000)

If the adults in a student's life have different expectations of the student, who will help guide the student to reach his/her goals for the future? If everyone has a different idea of what the future holds, then guidance, support, or advice might be misdirected—resulting in a terrible loss of opportunity for the student.

Understanding family and student expectations and helping to guide adolescents through important and complicated choices about middle, high school, and beyond is one of your most important jobs as a teacher. But you can't do it alone. Helping teens reach their future goals depends on increasing the level of trust and collaboration among parents, teachers, and other school professionals.

Without a real understanding of the lives of your students and families, there is a danger that your advice, guidance, efforts to discourage or encourage them, and suggestions about career opportunities, classes, and colleges might be tempered by your own preconceived notions and beliefs.

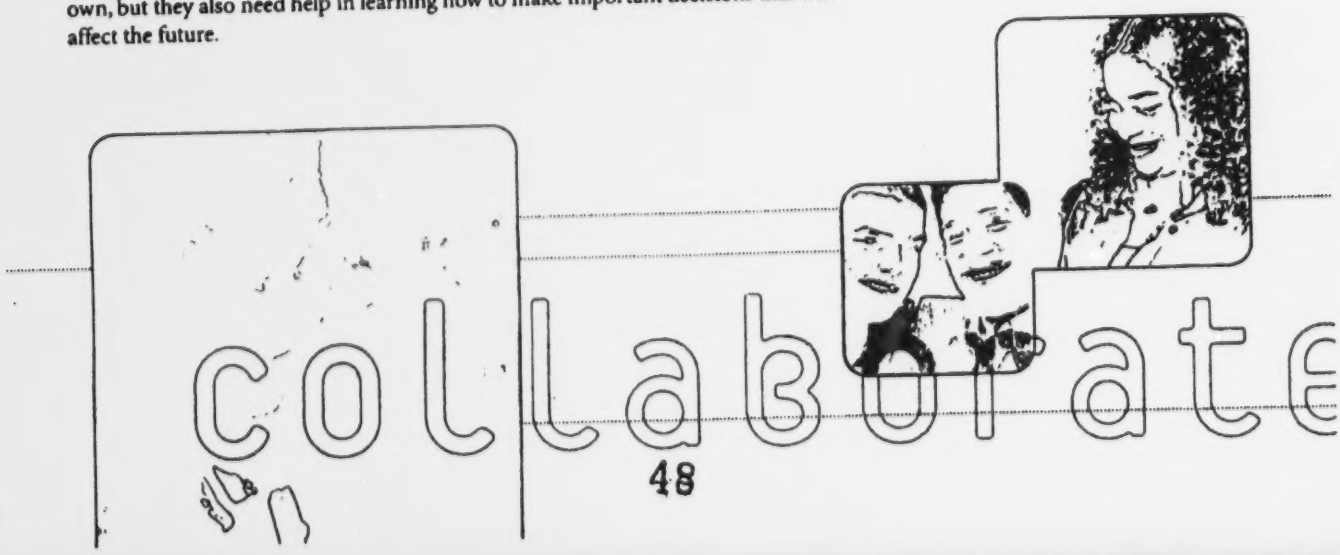
Nobody is immune from the tendency to make assumptions, so you may find yourself thinking that a student who acts "cool" or sleeps in class is not "college material." But there is probably more to the story, and parents, community contacts, guidance counselors and other professionals in the school can help you get the information you need to get a true picture of each student.

Bring together your colleagues who are interested in making new efforts to reach out to students and families. Arrange to have lunch with a few teachers and administrators to discuss ways to reach particular students and parents. You can strategize together about how to handle individual students and determine how to provide that little bit of extra adult attention that can make a difference. The extra attention can demonstrate to the student that he or she is a valued and important member of the school community, help connect their interests and future goals to the here-and-now of school, and help them become more engaged with their schoolwork, achieve at a higher level, and improve their hopes for the future.

As the author of a recent *Time* magazine article warns: "Parental involvement drops off drastically in the teenage years—a full 50% between sixth and ninth grades. But research likewise shows that parents who back off in the face of teen surliness are making a big mistake at a time when students are making academic decisions with real consequence for the future."
(Morse, May 2001, page 4)

Teenagers need support to make decisions

Certainly, teenagers need more independence and less adult intervention than elementary school students. It is important that they practice negotiating life on their own, but they also need help in learning how to make important decisions that will affect the future.



Research shows...
Adolescents "lament their lack of parental attention and guidance in making educational and career decisions, in forming adult values, and in assuming adult roles." (Carnegie, 1995)

"Teachers don't have an accurate enough grasp on each individual's interests and don't know what they're looking for in, and need to get out of, life. They can only see things from an education-for-the-moment point of view because they don't know what's in your long-run plans."

Ninth-grade girl, quoted in MetLife Survey 2000

Students, parents, and teachers all struggle when adolescents are faced with a flood of hormones, uncertainty about the future, and peer pressure. Students may have very powerful ideas about the future, but may not share these ideas because they don't want to be judged or lose control of their life. The adults in a student's life can help the student plan—and then take the steps that can make their dreams a reality. Getting together for breakfast with a few parents, talking on the phone or "conversing" by e-mail in the evening with colleagues are ways to open up lines of communication and encourage others to openly discuss how to guide individual students to fulfill their goals.

In order to reach students, it is crucial to rally all of the adults you can for their input and assistance. Other adults can help you assist students in many ways. Guidance counselors, social workers, special education teachers, cafeteria workers, and other teachers can offer different perspectives on each child. People from outside the school who can give students glimpses into what various careers are like and how they can find out about them also are helpful resources.

There are many options for the future

Research shows...
Just 8.5% of students from the poorest 25% of U.S. households will enter and complete a four-year college degree program by age 24 while 60% of students from households in the top 25% will complete college by that age. (Carney, 2001)

In U.S. public schools, many students are tracked into low-achieving classes, where they are likely to remain for their entire academic career. In addition, there often is a mismatch between academic preparation in many high-poverty schools and the skills demanded by well-paying jobs. Teachers who work in high-poverty communities have a special responsibility to make sure that students have a team of adults behind them, who take responsibility for helping them navigate through the maze of options for achieving a successful future.

The more students talk to their parents about school, the more likely they are to go on to college; having friends with plans to go on to college also is associated with better college enrollment; and students who participate in two or more extracurricular activities are more likely to enroll in college (NCES, December 1997).

Students must learn that there are some jobs that require a college degree, while there also are many jobs that do not require a college degree, but offer on-the-job training or require vocational training. Since, typically, the guidance counselor's job involves advising hundreds of students on careers and college, students don't often get the individual attention they need to make important choices. You can help the students in your classes by playing a role in their preparation for the future.

The truth is that not everyone makes it to college. As a matter of fact, most Americans simply do not complete four years of college. The 2000 Census reports that just 26% of all adults ages 25 and older completed a bachelor's degree or more. For students of color, the chances of going on to postsecondary education are even slimmer (the percentage of African Americans completing a bachelor's degree or more is 17%; the percentage of Latinos is 11%). Moreover, only half of those who enroll in college finish their degree.

In light of this, the more knowledge you have about your students—inside and outside of school—and the more support you give them for making connections to others who can influence their choices, the greater their chances are for success in the future. Working with parents and others, you can help keep students on track.

More expertise leads to more opportunity

Research shows...
In addition to teachers and parents being trained to work in collaboration with one another, teachers should also receive training in working with other professionals in the schools, such as guidance counselors and school psychologists. (Comer, 1980)

Guidance counselors, school counselors and psychologists, special education teachers, principals, and others in the school are important resources. They not only can model career options for students who might want to work in schools, but also can offer resources for teachers who want to work with parents to increase family involvement and help guide students to successful futures.

Your school specialists may have had training that could enhance your curricula, assignments, and projects. Specialized school professionals can help you plan, organize, and run information sessions about college and career choices, communicate with parents about the importance of their involvement, and advise teachers about innovative and successful ways to encourage students and families to focus on the future. School counselors may also be knowledgeable about the ways a student's out-of-school environment connects with academic and personal success. Special education teachers may know how to develop individualized education plans for students with special needs, and other students, in order to help students lay out the steps for their desired futures. Principals can provide support for teachers embarking on new or increased family involvement efforts by demonstrating "buy-in" from the top, encouraging school staff from different departments to work together, and sanctioning a reward system for those who participate.

In addition, some students may talk more easily to a guidance counselor or social worker, who can then relay (taking precautions, of course, to protect the student's confidentiality) certain important information to the student's teachers and parents. There may be a teacher who can advise you on how to reach a family with whom he/she shares cultural ties, or a teacher who has a special relationship with a particular family. Certain parents may not want to talk to you or to the guidance counselor, but they will talk to a principal or another teacher, who can bring you into the loop, once trust is established.

Consider this!

- The teenager who sleeps through class might be interested in his or her future, but might be exhausted by working a job after school or watching siblings at night.
- The kid who acts "cool" by looking like he or she doesn't care about school might be embarrassed in front of his/her peers to be concerned about the academic future.
- The parent who doesn't show up in school to see the counselor about college plans might lack knowledge and be fearful about how to pay for college.
- The student who won't talk to a teacher about the future might fear that his/her dreams would be discouraged.
- The student who is reluctant to share hopes and dreams with a teacher might be showing the respect his/her culture has taught.

WHAT ONE TEACHER CAN DO

Demonstrate interest in students' futures

Let your students know that their future plans interest you and that you will do what you can to help them and their parents. You can show you care by initiating conversations with parents and students about life after high school. Let parents know that you understand that they play a critical role in helping students make the big transitions, whether it is the transition to high school, which requires course selection that could affect the future, or the transition to college or career.

Make it clear to students that adults talk about them because they want to help them succeed and make good choices. Students will be affected—and even may be impressed—by the fact that the adults in the school are discussing them.

Research shows...
C's or lower between the sixth and eighth grades is considered a characteristic of students at risk. (NCES, 1997)

Communicate the fact that you have high expectations and that you believe successful college and career experiences are in the future for every student. Students and their parents must set high academic goals—C's will not do.

A number of teachers got together and wrote a proposal aimed at improving student test results through an incentive—a trip to Chicago for students who increased their grade point average at least one full point. The result in a ten-week period was an average increase in grade points of 2.0 for a majority of our students.

Talk to parents and students about how parent involvement affects student achievement and personal success. And, demonstrate your caring by initiating conversations with parents and students about life after high school and bringing in professionals (including parents) to talk about their jobs. Families need clear information about the steps appropriate for their children's future success. Even letting them know that there are specific steps they can take will make a difference and may relieve some stress about planning for the future.

tip

Encourage parents to visit the guidance counselor early on to discuss steps toward college and career, and obtain resources to help in the planning.

Lay out the steps to college and career

Research shows...
In general, the difference between students who enroll in college and students who do not is not dependent on income level or level of parents' education. Enrolling in college has more to do with having minimal qualifications for admission and taking the steps necessary to enroll. (NCES, 1997)

Whether students emerge qualified to attend college is very dependent on parents' steering their children to the right courses, etc.

Shaping a child's destiny often means taking a series of small but pivotal steps, starting in middle school. There is growing evidence that students and their families need to plan for college and/or postsecondary training earlier than they may think is necessary.

While not everyone goes to college, students have nothing to lose by planning to go to college—and so much to gain from it. Do your students know the steps? As a teacher, you can be particularly effective by working with the guidance counselor, parents, and others to help students explore the variety of options available to them and making sure they are doing the right work in middle and high school.
See TOOL: Steps to College, page 63.

Research shows...
Discussions involving students, parents, and teachers have the greatest impact on students' going to four-year colleges if these discussions begin before the student's sophomore year in high school.
(Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999)

A rigorous college preparatory program in high school depends on students' taking sequential course work in math. In order to keep later options open for them, eighth and ninth graders need to plan to take the right courses—including algebra and geometry. Many students and families aren't aware that choices like this are so critical.
See TOOL: How to Be School Savvy, page 65.

Robert Moses, creator of the innovative and effective Algebra Project, designed to make students of color more successful in pursuing advanced math education, realized that in order to reach students and parents in the communities he wanted to reach, he needed to connect the "simple" message—take algebra classes—to a much broader political issue: Taking algebra and advancing in math may improve the quality of your life and the life of your community. Ask your students and their parents the following questions:

- What is algebra for?
- Why do we want students to study it?
- Why is it important to gain access to and become literate in high-level math?
- How does achieving in math affect one's economic life?

See: www.algebra.org

Teachers need to be persistent in talking to students and parents about the future—and middle school is not too early to start. New teachers, especially, may feel that doing this is not their place, but it is. Talking to students and parents about their future plans and about the steps they need to take in order to make those plans a reality is one of the most important things you can do as a teacher. One middle school teacher suggested giving students a strategic focus for each year of high school:
I communicate to my middle school students that they must be flexible and be prepared to adjust to a slightly different atmosphere when they enter high school. They must establish personal goals and develop strategies to accomplish them. Make sure you receive all freshman year credits and maintain a high GPA. When you begin sophomore year, expectations increase. Develop a relationship with your guidance counselor and communicate why you want to do well in school and how much you appreciate the need for their assistance. As you enter your junior and senior years, be sure to maintain your high grade point average and remain focused on entering that college or university that you and your parents have been preparing for most of your life.

The Metropolitan Career and Technical Center in Providence, RI, has developed their whole curriculum around students' interests. For example, if a student is interested in car mechanics, she or he explores this topic in all classes—math, social studies, English, and science. In this way, learning is guided by students' own inquiry.

"I do an 'All About Me' book, where parents write about their children and kids write about themselves—what they're good at, what they like, other important adults in their lives, which teachers they like best, etc. Since I work with a lot of immigrant parents, I have their entries translated into English."

Chicago high school teacher

See TOOL: All About Me, page 67, and All About My Child, page 69.

Don't forget boys!

National indicators suggest that boys are falling behind girls in school, particularly in less competitive or less achievement-oriented schools. Boys are less likely to stay in school, apply to college, and enroll in rigorous courses. One boy in eleventh grade said, "Girls have more people talking to them, encouraging them. Girls are often friendlier to teachers and adults, a boy doesn't open up to the same degree. If he's upset, he might just stop coming to class."

(Coeyman, May 29, 2001)

Create assignments that help plan the future

One of the toughest challenges teachers face is how to engage an adolescent in academic learning that seems irrelevant to them. Often, students don't connect their current schoolwork with the future direction of their lives. It is important to work with parents and other adults in a student's life to connect schoolwork to college and to careers. This can be accomplished through curricula tailored to student interests and that engages other adults in a student's life.

Start by getting down on paper what everyone thinks about where students are going: Have students list important milestones they envision in their lives (e.g., buying their first car, getting their first full-time job, getting married, etc.). Then have them write how old they think they will be when they reach these important milestones. Make this an interactive assignment by asking their parents to make the same predictions and have students compare their answers with those of their parents, noting the differences and similarities. Use checklists about values and work styles to help students assess what kind of working environment would suit them best. Students also can use these tools to interview each other, their parents, siblings, teachers, or other school staff about their respective academic and career experiences.

Whatever subject you teach, find ways to tailor assignments or class discussions to students' career and/or college interests. Ask students to develop a career plan and give you a copy for your reference. Have students list their ideal occupations, and research—with the help of other adults—the postsecondary education required for these fields.

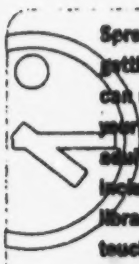
In addition, give students topics to write about that later can be incorporated into a college entrance essay.

- Highlight a career that fits with your subject area, a career followed by a personality whom students are learning about in social studies or English class, or a career featured in the local media or national current events.
- Have students compare the retention and job placement rates of local vocational and technical programs.
- When you have parents or other adults come in to talk about their jobs, encourage them to address how skills, such as writing, math, and computer skills, figure into their jobs.

Ask for help

You can't do the job of guiding your students all by yourself; students need the perspectives of many adults. Part of your job as a teacher is to rally all the resources you can to assist the students in important decisions. Teachers in middle and high school, where there is a focus on a specific discipline, don't always collaborate with other teachers. Take the initiative to ask other educators for advice and ideas. The more seasoned professionals in your school want to help you; however, they will probably not volunteer unless you seek them out. Don't forget to use your principal as a resource.

- Arrange meetings with guidance counselors, who can give you pointers on how to help students focus on their academics—take rigorous courses, learn study habits, keep up with assignments, and actively participate in classes.
- Rely on your colleagues to be "cultural informants." Ask other teachers, especially bilingual teachers and members of the student's cultural or ethnic group, to help you understand any cultural challenges that students might have in communicating with you.
- Use your free periods to observe the popular teachers in your school to see how their teaching is very often anchored in an understanding of students' lives.
- Find out what resources your school or district has for helping parents understand the financial aid process.
- Arrange information sessions for middle school parents so they understand the requirements and procedures in a new high school; arrange sessions for high school families about the college environment.
- Talk to the special education teachers in your school, who have training in the many ways to identify different learning styles, make valuable observations about students' classroom behavior, adapt assignments, measure progress, and work with other professionals in the school.



Spread out the time that getting to know students can require—propose to your principal that every adult in the building, including teachers, librarians, and cooks, touch base with 20 kids each week and help to mentor them about jobs and college.

A thoughtful bilingual teacher informed me that Spanish-speaking students in school came from two groups: students who had lived in rural areas where compulsory education effectively ended in fifth grade, and students who had lived in cities and were children of relatively well-educated parents. The second group of students was able to build on the literacy skills they had developed in Spanish. The students from villages were learning how to write while they were learning English. This data helped me reformulate my instructions so that I was more effective with both groups of students. (Weiner, 1999, p. 32)

Reach out to the community

One innovative practice that school districts and teacher preparation programs are using to help new staff better understand their students is called "community mapping." This involves a guided tour of the neighborhoods where students live, which can inform teachers about the economy of the neighborhood, the kinds of neighborhoods students live in, and the roles that stores, religious institutions, businesses, and other organizations play in the community and how they might contribute to your class or school. One teacher from Chicago contacted IBM and arranged for employees to become e-mail mentors to her students. Students were encouraged to ask questions about IBM work. The students and their mentors met in person at the end of the year.

You can also just "hang out" and visit homes and neighborhoods to learn about your students' families and communities. One of the best ways to learn about the community you teach in is to do a walking or driving tour—either before school starts or during the year. Ask a teacher or parent to escort you on a walk in the local neighborhood and point out important features.

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"We had to educate them (the teachers) about the community and what children here may be going through.... On these walks it became apparent that the teachers had a lot of stereotypes about the kids they were teaching and their families."

(Funkhouser and Gonzales, 1993, p. 21)

Whoever arranges the community tours should try to schedule meetings with local community leaders as well, so new teachers can get to know the resources in the community. Also try to schedule a visit to the religious institutions, community center, public library, and clinics. During the year, these are good places for teachers or parent coordinators to visit to develop relationships and chat with parents about what is going on in school. They also provide "neutral ground" where teachers, parents, and students can meet. If enough teachers are interested, organize a school bus for staff to go meet and welcome parents before school starts.

Let students see you outside of class! Visit/participate in after-school clubs in order to see how your students interact with one another socially and to learn about their special talents.

Or, invite the community into your school:

- Invite students to invite parents, older siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. to come in and talk about their lives, college, and career experiences.
- Bring in tutors (include students' siblings, mentors, parents—call the local Boys or Girls Clubs or local businesses) to help with course work, course selection, and planning for the future.
- Build alliances with local businesses—ask them to tutor or mentor students, or come into school to discuss their operations and what they are looking for in employees.
- Ask guidance counselors, directors of local youth agencies, or the career center at your local college to speak with high school students about their careers.
- Arrange college representatives to visit to take a look at the next step in students' lives—and invite parents.
- Invite a recruiter from the local community college to speak to your students. Community colleges provide access to higher education with low costs, flexible schedules, and locations close to home.

* * *

There are important roles for all of the adults who touch a student's life. If you are willing to tap the major influences in a child's life, and the human resources in your school, the community, and the student's home life, you may contribute to a student's ability to make seemingly small, but often monumental, decisions that will affect the future.

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

Steps to college

Here are some concrete activities teachers can do to help inform students and their parents about how to make the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

Wanting to go to college

- ○ Give students and their families practical informa tion about college to make them more familiar with the idea of going to college.
- ○ Learn about the services your school guidance counselors or college advisors offer and tell your students to visit these professionals frequently.
- ○ Invite guidance counselors or college advisors into your class for a discussion.
- ○ Tell your students to talk to their parents about college, and vice versa.
- ○ Find out what family members are in college and invite them to speak to your class (informally) about what college life is like.
- ○ Find out about good resources for financial aid and pass this information to your students and parents. Visit the ThinkCollege Web site (www.ed.gov/thinkcollege).
- ○ Take students and parents on field trips to colleges and college fairs.
- ○ Make sure the school library and parent center are stocked with information about postsecondary education.

Taking the right course work

- ○ Talk to parents and students about the requirements for high school graduation and the recommended sequence of classes for college-bound students.
- ○ Discuss how to choose the right electives to keep college and vocational options open.
- ○ Develop a list of extracurricular activities that can boost students' chances of getting into college.

Taking entrance exams

- ○ Keep informed of test dates and test preparation resources in your school or community.
- ○ Point out information you cover in your classes that could be helpful in taking the tests (e.g., remind them what vocabulary words are good SAT words).

Applying to college

- ○ Work on class-related essays that can serve as students' admission essays.
- ○ Go over a sample application or financial aid form in class—invite parents to attend or hold a separate event. Ask the person who does college advising in your school to help you.
- ○ Be persistent about asking students if they have applied to all the colleges on their list.

Enrolling in college

- ○ Find out what you can do to help students and parents create and complete their final college "to do" list (e.g., preregistering for courses, making the first payment, and following through with other details).

How to be school savvy

A teacher can be an advocate for parents in the often confusing world of high school courses and requirements. Here are some questions to ask for teachers and parents:

Ask the student:

- Are you in the right place academically? Do your grades reflect what you are capable of? Are your classes too easy?
- Are you in the college prep "track"?
- Do you know how to inquire about the possibility of changing the level or "track" of your classes?
- Do you have a plan for what classes you will take in the future?
- Do you know where you can get extra help in subjects that are difficult for you?
- What are your thoughts about college? What type of institution do you plan to attend: two-year, four-year?
- Are you taking the right courses to keep future options open (i.e., college)?
- What are your reasons for not following a college prep program or vocational program?

Ask the guidance counselor about the vocational program:

- Do students in the vocational program finish high school, or do most of them drop out?
- Do students in the vocational program take the kinds of challenging academic courses that a college would accept?
- Do students in the vocational program later go on to two- or four-year colleges?
- Do students in the vocational program eventually land good, high-paying jobs in their field, or do most end up working for minimum wage?

From the American Federation of Teachers booklet, *Hard Work Pays: What You Have to Do in High School to Get the Life You Want*

Ask the guidance counselor about college:

- What are the courses recommended for students who want to go to either a two-year or four-year college?
- How are the college-bound requirements different from high school graduation requirements?
- What electives are recommended for college-bound students?
- What activities can students do to strengthen their preparation for college (i.e., after school, during the summer)?
- What kinds of grades do different colleges require?
- How can the family pay for college?

From *Preparing Your Child for College* (www.ed.gov.pubs/pt2.html)

An RNT **Connect for Success** Tool

All about me

Use this tool as an assignment and ask your students to share the answers with you and their parents.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

- If you had three words to describe yourself, what words would they be?

- Who are the most important adults in your life? Why?

- Who are your closest friends?

- Does your family speak a language other than English? Which language(s)?

- How can you help your family better understand what is happening in school?

- How many siblings do you have? How do you get along?

- What responsibilities (jobs, chores, child care, etc.) do you have after school?

- How do you think your family (or other adults in your household) can help you succeed in school?

tool continued on back ➔

- What is your favorite subject in school? Least favorite?

- Who are your favorite teachers? Why?

- What do you like to do outside of school?

- What do you want to be when you grow up?

- What kinds of activities do you do as a family?

- How many times did your parents visit your school last year?

- If your parent or another family member were to become involved in school, how do you think they could become involved?

  Tutor kids
  Help kids during class
  Help with sports
  Work in the library or lunchroom
  Talk to us about their jobs
  Talk to us about how to get to college
  Help with homework

All about my child

Send this to parents to inform you about their child.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

The best thing you can do to help your child succeed is to stay interested in his or her education and share the joy of learning. Students actually spend much more time at home than they do in the classroom. Research shows that how students spend their time outside of school affects their academic success.

The more parents, teachers, and students know about one another, the easier it is to work together to make sure your child succeeds in school. Please answer these questions as honestly as you can. You can reach me by phone at

_____

by e-mail at

_____

or come to see me at these times:

_____

if you have any questions about this assignment.

- If you had three words to describe your child, what words would they be?

- What language(s) does the family speak? Do you have difficulty with English? If so, what kind of help could the school provide?
  - ○ Translated messages
  - ○ Courses in English
  - ○ Names and phone numbers of other parents or teachers who speak your language
  - ○ Other

- Who are the most important adults in your child's life?

- Who are your child's closest friends?

- How many siblings does your child have? How do they get along?

- What responsibilities (job, chores, child care, etc.) does your child have outside of school?

- If you work, what time do you leave and come home? How about other family members?

tool continued on back ➔

- How do you think you can best help your child's academic success?

- What is your child's favorite subject in school? Least favorite?

- What does your child do for fun?

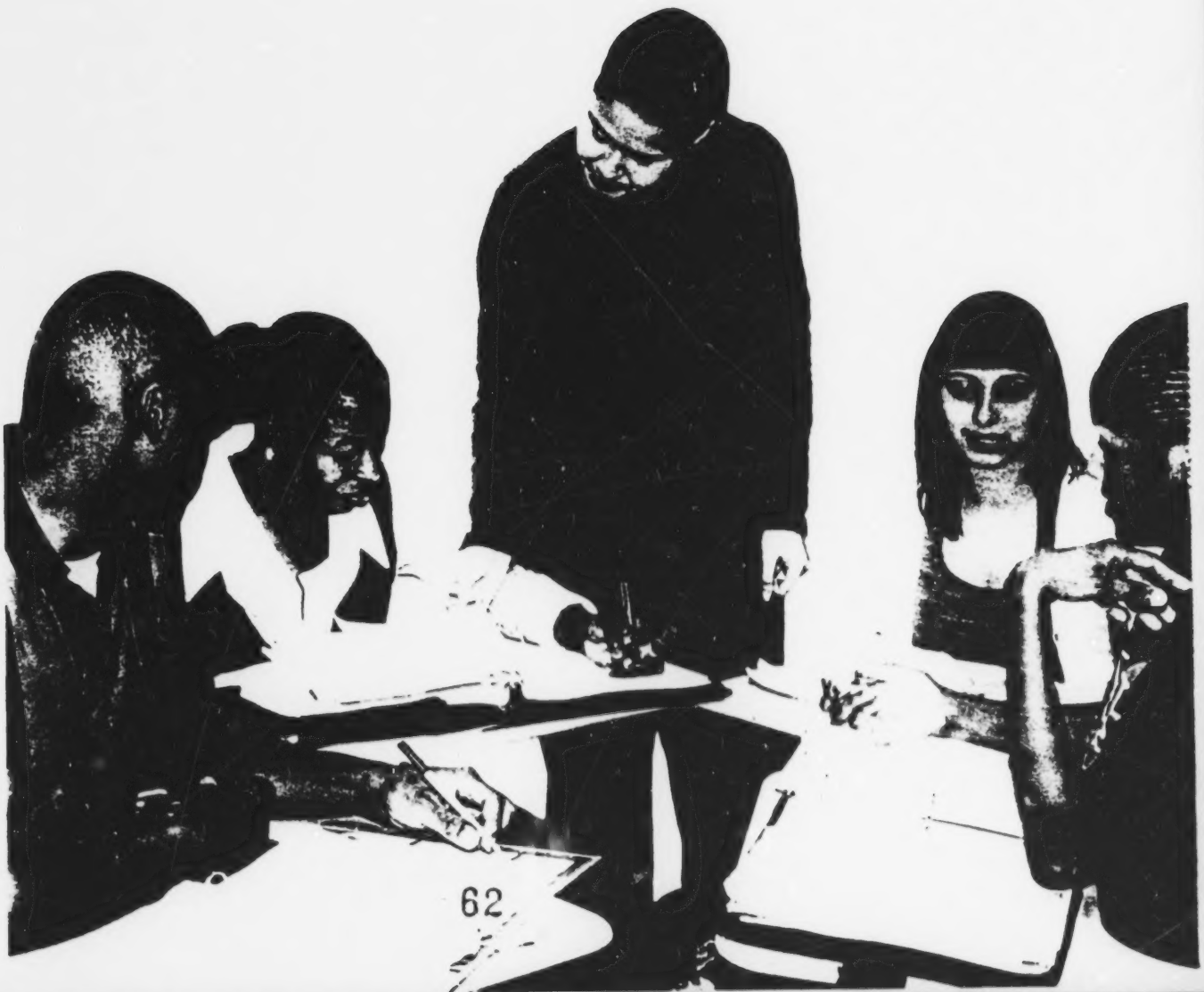
- What kinds of activities do you do as a family?

- How many times did you visit your child's school last year?

- How would you like to become involved in school?
  - ○ I would like to volunteer at school.
  - ○ I would like to make phone calls to other parents.
  - ○ I would like to help organize social events at school.
  - ○ I would like to tutor kids in my home_____or at school_____.
  - ○ I would like to participate in field trips.
  - ○ I would like to translate material for parents who speak_____(language).

- Other ways I could assist the teacher and students are:

- Concerns or suggestions:



5 Sparking whole school change

KEY ISSUES

- Parents want to be involved in the school in new ways, including decision making, management, or participating in classes or training.
- Parents need to be asked how they want to become involved.
- Parents can contribute to positive school change and support teachers' advocacy efforts.
- One teacher can make a difference by creating new opportunities for parents to be involved, providing resources for parents to assist them in helping their children succeed, and serving as a model for other teachers.

My school is in an African and Latino American community. The school is especially "parent friendly." To support parent involvement, parent workshops and meetings are held regularly. An active parent room is available to assist parents while on campus. Parent volunteers include Spanish-speaking parents and a trained surrogate parent who attends meetings for absent parents. Extensive home contact is an essential element of the California Urban Classroom Teacher Program. The faculty recognize the critical role parents play in education. New teachers are encouraged and supported by the administration and veteran teachers when taking on leadership roles involving parents. One teacher invites her principal and teachers to her subject-area parent meetings, another talks about parents and homework on the radio, and another writes articles for a local paper, encouraging parents to participate in their child's education. Our teachers find that sharing ideas during common planning periods and faculty meetings affects the practices of other teachers.

Beverly Silverstein, Los Angeles, CA

Parents want more than traditional roles

The traditional parent roles in schools are changing, and many parents want to be more involved and have more of a say in what their children are doing and learning. Parents want to participate as both supporters and active partners. Many families not only want to discuss personal issues, such as the grades and future prospects of their own children, but also policy issues, such as the content of the curriculum and the balancing of the school budget.

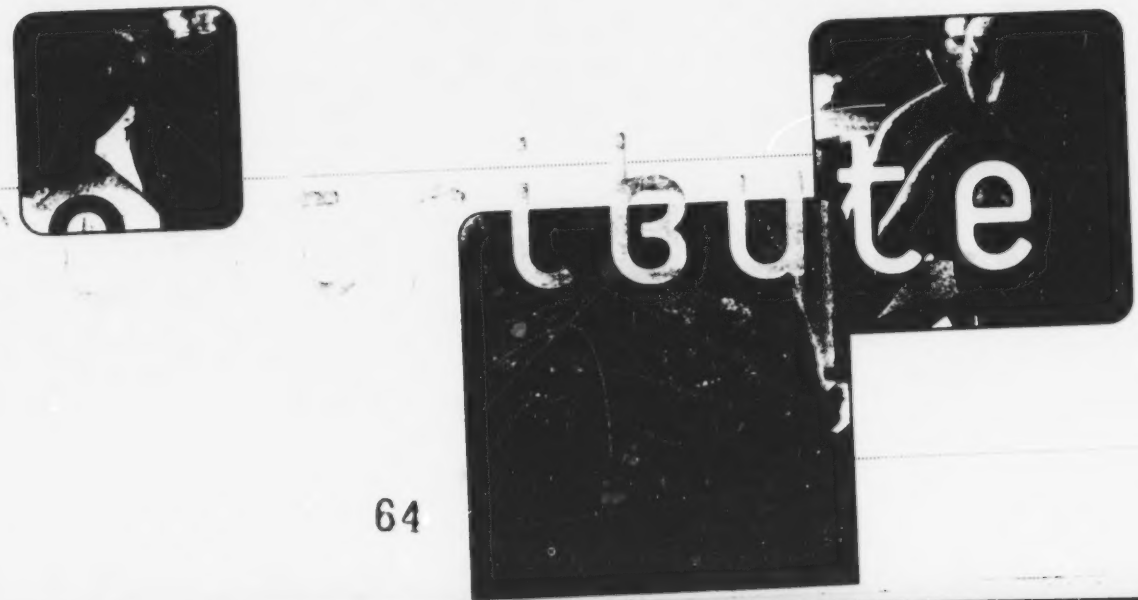
Research shows...
51% of parents with kids in grades 7-12 said that what they think doesn't count very much at their child's school. (MetLife Survey, 2000)

"We don't want to be selling cupcakes or nachos," said a parent in a recent *Los Angeles Times* article (7/22/01). "We want to work together with our children's teachers and the principal. But we have to learn how to do it."

Teachers and parents may hold very different expectations about what expanding involvement means. Schools often want parent involvement only on their terms—they want parents to accommodate their schedule and participate in ways they define. Some parents, who see the education of their children as the responsibility of the teachers, and who have entrusted their children to the teachers and the school, may be suspicious if a teacher asks them for help or participation. On the other hand, a parent interested in a decision-making role might feel alienated when asked to merely volunteer. Some parents may welcome "skills training" and adolescent development classes offered by the school, while others may be insulted by the implication that they do not know how to be good parents.

Parents can be change agents

Parents can—and should—play important roles in schools, in addition to working with classroom teachers. Parent involvement expert Joyce Epstein suggests six roles parents can play in schools: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. There are other options for parents that even include participating in the management of the school. While many are satisfied filling traditional roles, like that of volunteer, some parents also are seeking out new roles in school.



Today, roles for parents are being expanded, collaborations are becoming more interdependent, and in some communities, parents are powerful advocates for systemic change. This year, in the Bronx, NY, parents kept a for-profit corporation from taking over what the corporation was calling a "failing" school. Parents across the country have rallied in support of students who protest or boycott standardized tests, and in Denver, black and Latino parents designed a dual-language school. In Drew, MS, parents are fighting school board policies that have led to the expulsion of a disproportionate number of black students (Jonsson, 2001).

National organizations are calling for recognition of parents as partners in their children's education. The NAACP has joined with other groups in a three-year, $120 million ad campaign to encourage black and Hispanic parents to become more involved in their children's schooling. Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, which works to raise achievement among poor children and children of color, says that parents should..."become not only homework-checkers, but advocates for systemic change" (Bayot, 2001).

Parents and community members are increasingly voicing their opinions about schools and learning. As a new teacher, you might be overwhelmed or intimidated by the parents who are interested in becoming involved in significant ways. At the same time, it can also be a golden opportunity to learn to work with parents.

One teacher can impact the whole school

Research shows...
Parent involvement is best sustained if the school structure supports and encourages teachers to engage parents in meaningful ways—but teachers are the "critical variable to delivery." (Comer, 1980, p. 110)

As a new teacher, you probably can't imagine trying to change a whole school; you may feel that your classroom is about as much as you can handle. However, by starting small and building successful relationships and partnerships, you can have an impact on the school environment and significantly increase parent involvement. Sharing your success stories with another teacher can change one more classroom, and talking to your principal about your experiences with institutional challenges to family involvement could change many classrooms.

School policies or personnel can hinder your work and dampen your enthusiasm. You may need to focus on your own classroom at first, but don't abandon efforts to influence your school community. Try to find one like-minded colleague, share the tools in this toolkit with other teachers (especially *What We Know About Parent Involvement* on page 83), and model effective involvement techniques.

Your attitudes can be contagious. As has been pointed out previously in this toolkit, teachers' perceptions about students directly impact student motivation and achievement. If teachers have low expectations, they sometimes "give up" and don't work to help students succeed; students sense that they are not expected to achieve and their motivation and achievement decline. The cycle continues when, in response to declining achievement, the teacher continues to expect less, causing student motivation and achievement to decline further. However, fortunately, the reverse is also true: If a teacher has high expectations for students, the students will be more motivated and will achieve greater success. By sharing with your colleagues the high and realistic expectations you develop about students by getting to know them and their families better, you can impact student achievement in other classes.

Consider this!

- Communities have varying beliefs about who is "in charge" of student learning—teachers, parents, or students. Some families may feel their involvement is intruding on the school's responsibility, while other families may feel slighted if the school does not respect the way they teach or work with their children at home (regarding structure, discipline, asking teenagers to work, etc.).
- In some cultures, women are responsible for their children's education, while in other cultures, the men make all the decisions. Teachers need to be aware of the mix of beliefs among specific cultures and ethnic groups within parent committees or volunteer groups.
- Recently immigrated families may want their children to succeed academically but may not want to see their children completely "Americanized." Teachers need to convey that they want all children to succeed, regardless of the level of assimilation.
- Other professionals in the school can add to your knowledge of individual students, parents, and cultural attitudes, behaviors, and expectations.

Make the most of everyone's time by including parents when an expert comes to talk about state standards, local issues, or adolescent development

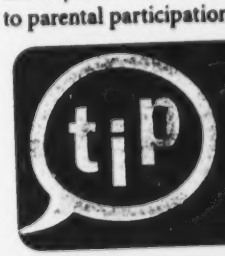
Create new options for parents

One of the most popular roles for parents is that of the volunteer—either for the classroom, field trips, or after-school events. Parent volunteering can be an exciting way to bring parents into the school and begin to develop the relationships of mutual trust that are so critical to effective parent involvement and, ultimately, to improved student learning and success.

But volunteering doesn't have to be limited to chaperoning field trips to the local museum, although that is one effective way to involve parents. Volunteer opportunities can include building a telephone network, tutoring, and aiding in the classroom; such opportunities can provide a basis for expanded relationships and ongoing communications with parents, which involve parents in the day-to-day world of the classroom.

It is important to find out how parents want to become involved and ask what kind of participation their abilities and schedules can support. Mail a survey to the parents and ask them how they would be willing to participate in activities, in your classroom and in the school, and what they would like to see the school offer. Send one out in the beginning of the year and follow up—keep asking for input. *See TOOL: Parent Involvement Survey, page 81.*

Before deciding how they will become involved, parents may want to be educated about the structure of the school, staff reporting lines, and job responsibilities. Adults who didn't finish school or who were educated in another country may not be familiar with the way American schools—especially high schools—operate. This can be a real barrier to parental participation, foster a lack of trust, and make parents feel insecure.



Hold an orientation or workshop during the year, at which school staff introduce themselves and explain their roles—without using jargon. A chart illustrating those roles might also be helpful.

It is important to make sure that parents feel welcome and supported when they attend any workshops or discussions, feel comfortable providing input, and are rewarded for their attendance, if possible.

One interesting model of collaboration is provided by the community school. Community schools are schools founded on a set of partnerships, to make sure that school becomes a place where services, supports, and opportunities lead to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. Community organizations bring after-school activities to the school, make sure mentors and tutors are available, and strengthen the sense of commitment to education among all participants. Visit http://www.communityschools.org/ to learn more.

To begin building a stronger community in your classroom or school, work to understand family needs. Then ask family members to lead after-school groups, and ask your school administration what opportunities there are for parents to design, monitor, or suggest changes to the school and the activities offered for children and families.

Another model, created by Dr. James Comer of the Yale Child Study Center, is designed to include students' parents or caretakers in the management of the school. Comer's School Development Program works to ensure that everyone has shared goals and plans. "Comer schools" operate on the belief that schools should address the relationship between students' backgrounds and how they adjust to school culture—a practice that improves both increased academic and personal achievement for the students in schools

in urban communities. This model also involves students in management and decision making committees, which introduces them to strategic planning and collaboration, presentation and negotiation skills, and mentors and role models.

Apply Comer's insights in your school by talking to students and parents about decision making and providing input around classroom issues. You can start small by letting students and parents make some decisions about the structure of a lesson, or plans for a field trip, after-school activity, or discussion group for parents.

Some parents may express a desire to have the school play a larger role in their lives. They might want assistance with learning how to help their children organize and plan for their schoolwork and how adolescence affects students' learning and relationships. As a teacher, you know that working with adolescents brings many challenges. This stage of life also can be quite challenging for parents. Consider starting a parent education group, in which parents can come together to learn about adolescent development, and exchange information about their strategies for guiding and supporting their children.

Many parents do not become involved in school activities, such as decision making and management, or even volunteering, because they are self-conscious about their English, their knowledge of school subjects, or their roles in the education of their children. School-sponsored ESL or math or science classes for family members can make a significant difference in the way families interact with teachers and school personnel.

Research shows...
The Parents Making a Difference (PMD) program in Providence, RI, really does make a difference. Parents volunteer to help other parents by calling the home of every absent student every day. They also work with the families of frequently absent students to ensure they get to school. In one middle school, this program has resulted in a ten percent increase in the attendance rate and a 63% decrease in suspensions and expulsions over two years. (Panasonic, 1997)

Build a parent center

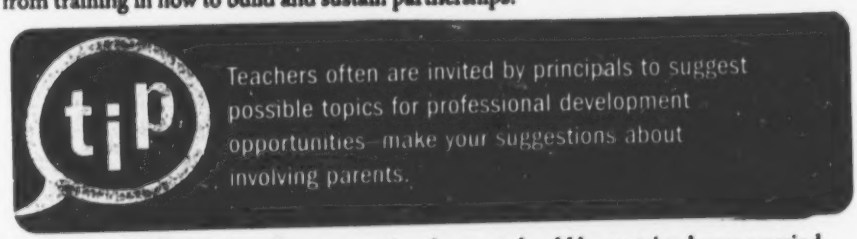
Developing a family center at school can be an effective way to bring parents into the school. The center can provide parents with a meeting place, and can be an area where classes in ESL, adolescent development, and homework skills can take place. It can also offer a resource exchange for parents to share information with other parents and with teachers. If there is not ample space in your school, set up a small area in your classroom and invite parents to come in any time and browse in the books and other resources. Or, talk to the school librarian to help you set up an area for parents in the library.

- Ask the guidance counselor to facilitate an evening session about talking to adolescents.
- Arrange field trips for parents to local libraries, school district offices, and community centers.
- Ask the principal if an underused classroom or meeting room could be used for families to meet after school, build a resource exchange, use computers, watch parenting videos, etc.

Once you have established that parents will come in and use the resources, talk to your principal about designating a space for a parent resource center. If there is a parent liaison or coordinator in your school, enlist their help in lobbying for a permanent office. *See TOOL: What to Include in Your Family Center, page 85.*

Develop training resources

Both parents and teachers need training in order to expand their roles in linking home and school. If families are going to join school management and decision-making teams and committees, they need to know how school bureaucracies work and what is expected of them as participants. In addition, both teachers and parents can benefit from training in how to build and sustain partnerships.


tip
Teachers often are invited by principals to suggest possible topics for professional development opportunities—make your suggestions about involving parents.

Ideally, training for teachers about parent involvement should be sustained over a period of time and include specific skills and strategies for communicating and collaborating. Parents can also benefit from gaining similar skills. If possible, bring in an expert to hold a training session for parents and school staff at the beginning of the school year to help your family involvement efforts get off on the right foot. Or, local colleges and universities, interested in developing partnerships with schools, often are willing to locate particular classes in neighborhoods to make college-level training accessible for parents and teachers. Some resources for training strategies and curricula include:

- ASPIRA Parents for Educational Excellence (APEX) trains Latino parents to become effective advocates for their children at school. **http://www.aspira.org/APEX.html**
- The National Association of Partnerships in Education in Alexandria, VA, can provide ideas about what trainings should include. **http://www.napehq.org/**
- The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans discusses ways that parents can be included in teacher training programs to help them learn skills to help their children at home. **http://www.ed.gov/offices/OIIA/Hispanic/pac/**
- The nonprofit organization, Communities in Schools, offers guidance to partners about working with parents. For more information, see **www.cisnet.org** or call **1-800-CIS-4KIDS.**
- Find out what community school networks are doing—schools that serve as the center for expanded resources for students and families. You can look at profiles of successful practices at **www.communityschools.org/approaches.html.**
- Learn what teachers and parents should aim for. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has developed national standards for parent involvement. **http://www.pta.org/programs/pfistand.htm#Standard1**

Influence teachers and administrators

As a new teacher, you likely have an enthusiasm for teaching that can be an asset when working with other teachers. Talk to colleagues about the successes you have had working with parents, and suggest that they try the same strategies in their classrooms. Show other teachers the student portfolios that help you get to know the student's life outside of school. Invite them to attend a class in which you cover an assignment involving parents, or come to a meeting of parents and students. Bring in the "specialists" (the librarian, physical education teacher, art teacher) and ask them to advise a small number of students regularly throughout the entire school year to discuss class selections, college and/or career plans, personal issues, local or national current events, and family roles.

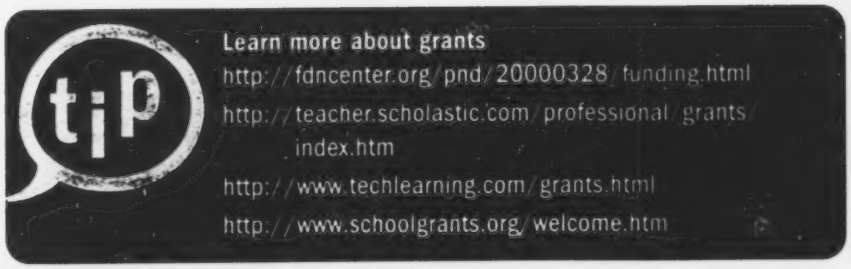
In certain schools, the entire first class of the day, or extended homeroom period, is dedicated to advising time. Model this kind of responsibility in your school by creating an "advisory group"—invite a few students to have lunch with you once a month to discuss career and college choices. Use study halls and homeroom periods to get to know students well enough to help guide them. Or, match students who need extra help with a colleague (ask the librarian to pay special attention to a few students) or send students with particular interests to a faculty member with the same interests. For instance, a student with a goal to be a professional athlete might learn about the college careers of athletes from the physical education teacher.

Offer to speak to your administrators about your experiences working with parents. If your principal is knowledgeable about family involvement, invite her/him to talk to a group of parents about the school's goals for involving parents and families. Ask your principal or another administrator to do a presentation about how family involvement impacts high school students academically. If you need to gain administrative support for your efforts to increase parent participation, build a case for yourself. *See TOOL: What We Know About Parent Involvement, page 83.* If parents want training or classes, offer to help the administration make this a reality.

The administrators in your school might be interested in a toolkit produced by the National Association of Partners in Education (napehq@napehq.org) about the administrator's roles in increasing family involvement. It includes suggestions for building partnerships, training school staff, and maintaining successful collaborations.

Think about funding...

This toolkit is dedicated to helping teachers find ways to increase family involvement without increased costs. However, at some point, you may need assistance for your activities—especially if you expand to include more resources, classes, office space, or a family center. Some districts are able to reallocate funding to ensure that family involvement programs succeed, but you may need to apply to the district or private and corporate philanthropies for funding. The links below will connect you with information regarding how to write a compelling grant proposal, who offers grants for teachers, and what kinds of programs get funded. Seeking funding is additional work, but take heart—one study found that the average cost per pupil for keeping families and communities involved in educational partnerships is just $20 (Epstein, 1997). *See TOOL: Sample Letter of Inquiry, page 87, for an example of how you might approach a funder.*



* * *

Given your commitment to involving parents in their children's education, you can move beyond your classroom to initiate substantial change in your school and in your community. There are many challenges, but you can be that little drop of water that starts the tidal wave of change. Family involvement is important—spread the word!

Parent involvement survey

Send this survey to parents to find out what they are thinking about parent involvement.

Ask a parent, student, or colleague to help translate this tool for non-English-speaking parents.

Dear Parents,
As a new teacher, I would like to know about your interest in becoming more involved with the high school. A group of teachers here are eager to find out what you are interested in doing and how we might expand your role to help all of our students achieve academically and personally. We will let you know about opportunities for volunteer activities, decision making about classes and school management, and relationships with the community. Please complete this short questionnaire and return it to me by _____.
Thank you very much.

1. What do you like about the school's way of involving you, as a parent, in your child's education?

2. What do you not like about the school's way of involving you, as a parent, in your child's education?

tool continued on back ➪

3. What activities would you be interested in joining if they were offered at school? Please check all that interest you.

- O Tutoring one student
- O Tutoring a group of students
- O Mentoring
- O Teaching an SAT preparation class before or after school
- O Becoming a student advisor
- O Leading parent meetings
- O Assisting a teacher for a few hours a week
- O Acting as a liaison between teachers and parents
- O Calling other parents to inform them about school activities
- O Translating school materials for teachers who only speak English
- O Joining a committee to discuss curriculum
- O Attending training sessions about adolescence, homework, etc.
- O Attending classes in ESL, computer skills, other: _____
- O Talking to teachers and other parents about community organizations (specifically: _____)
- O Speaking to students about career choices
- O Offering paid summer internships for students
- O Conducting a workshop on computer technology
- O Speaking to students about college or conducting a college orientation workshop

4. What is the one thing we should make sure to do to capture your interest in being more involved at home and at school with your child's education?

5. What are the best times of day for you to come to events and meetings at school?

6. If you are not interested at all, would you please explain why? *(Please call me at _____ to explain if you don't want to write it on this survey.)*

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

What we know about parent involvement

1. Involving parents can improve students' academic performance, attendance, attitude, and prospects for future work and college achievement.

2. Working with parents will likely make them feel better about the way the school is educating and treating their children, and about how well teachers are doing their jobs.

3. Teens with highly involved parents are three times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree.

4. Working with parents can bridge the gap between the cultures of home and school—leading to a common understanding among teachers, parents, and students about the expectations, norms, and goals of school.

5. Parents from high-poverty communities are just as interested in being involved in their children's education as those from middle-class or upper-class families.

6. Parents need specific information on how to help their students achieve in school, such as written policies or contracts, training, ongoing communication, and collaboration with teachers and other parents.

7. When the school works with parents on how to help their children, low-income and single parents are as effective at helping their children as parents who have more education and free time.

8. Schoolwide efforts to engage parents in meaningful ways, including collaboration and partnerships, are the most effective in impacting student achievement.

9. Each teacher can impact student achievement by communicating regularly with parents, asking them to work with their children at home, and bringing them into the classroom as volunteers.

10. Schools often hinder student achievement when they discourage parent involvement by not requesting and welcoming parent participation, defining family involvement and roles, and scheduling inconvenient meetings or events.

Adapted from *Selected Parent Involvement Research*, a summary of selected research compiled by John H. Wherry, Ed.D., President, The Parent Institute, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7272, 1-800-756-5525

What to include in your family center

- ○ Syllabi for courses at your school
- ○ Community college and college course catalogs and applications
- ○ College admissions reference books (like Peterson's Guide)
- ○ Financial aid resources
- ○ Local adult education catalogs
- ○ Community maps or other projects that reflect parent input
- ○ Flyers and applications for local classes or activities
- ○ List of parents active in the school who can act as counselors, advisors, and resources for other parents
- ○ Information and phone numbers for medical and mental health centers, food banks, and sources of secondhand clothing in the community
- ○ Advertisements for any family center activities, such as potluck dinners, classes, meetings, etc.
- ○ Resource exchange table or bulletin board—where one parent can post a question or publicize a resource and ask for responses from other parents
- ○ A clothing exchange
- ○ A sewing machine
- ○ State standards, information about state tests, and examples of student work
- ○ Voter registration forms
- ○ Information about immigration laws
- ○ Lists of community agencies and their services
- ○ A comfortable place for at least two people to sit and talk
- ○ Surveys about what parents would like to do or how they would like to be more involved at the school
- ○ A list of resources for information about family involvement programs
- ○ Books and other resources on family involvement, education, adolescence, and homework
- ○ Toys, games, children's books, and home learning kits for families to borrow
- ○ A computer with Internet access
- ○ A coffee pot and small refrigerator
- ○ A suggestion box

An RNT Connect for Success Tool

Sample letter of inquiry

Often, your first step in submitting a grant proposal will be to write a brief letter of inquiry (no longer than two pages) to the foundation before sending your proposal. Always address correspondence to a specific person (not To Whom It May Concern). Call the foundation to find out the name of the person who reads letters of inquiry and/or proposals (usually a program officer).

After sending your letter of inquiry, don't be hesitant about speaking to the program officer about your proposal. If there is a good match between the foundation's priorities and your program, they will be as interested in giving you money as you are in receiving it. The difficult part in speaking to a program officer for the first time is to be succinct and right on target about how your respective interests mesh.

Dear _____

I am writing to request a grant of $_____ from _____ (foundation name) to implement/continue the Central High School family involvement program. Given your institution's commitment to youth and community development, we believe this project will be of particular interest to you.

It has become increasingly clear that family involvement in students' school lives affects their self-esteem, academic achievement, and overall potential for success in the future. Sadly, reductions in the district's budget this year have forced the district to cut funding to the family involvement program.

This project has tremendous impact. Having an on-site parent center will provide parents a space to interact with children, teachers, and other parents, and to use a college/career resource library. The center will also host adult education classes. In this way, the center will help us attract parents to school and allow teachers to build relationships with families that are essential to students' achievement.

The challenge that _____ (foundation name) can help us meet is to provide financial resources that will allow us to staff the center, purchase materials for the career resource center, and train teachers and parents in how to build and sustain partnerships.

Targeted population
Briefly describe the demographics of your community and what groups will be affected by your program.

Program components
Write short description and bullet points.

Thank you for considering this request. Funding from _____ (foundation name) would provide critical resources for the program. I will call you in the next few weeks to discuss this proposal in more detail.

Sincerely,

SELECTED RESOURCES

Organizations

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)—has new national initiative, the AACTE-MetLife Foundation Parental Engagement Institute, which will review and develop best practices in parental involvement in teacher education. Washington, DC; (202) 293-2450; http://www.aacte.org/

American Association of School Administrators (AASA)—publishes several books and pamphlets aimed at increasing family involvement in education. Arlington, VA; (703) 528-0700; http://www.aasa.org/

American Federation of Teachers—provides many resources on how schools can involve families. Washington, DC; (202) 879-4400; www.aft.org

Big Picture Company, Inc.—designs plans for schools in which family involvement plays a major role. Providence, RI; (401) 456-0600; http://www.bigpicture.org/

First Day Foundation—increases parental and family involvement in education by making the first day of school a family celebration. Bennington, VT; (802) 447-9625; (877)-FIRST DAY; http://www.firstday.org/

Harvard Family Research Project—researches and analyzes education issues, including family/community involvement in education. Organizes the Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE), an effort to strengthen teacher preparation in family and community engagement (http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~hfrp/projects/fine.html). Cambridge, MA; (617) 495-9108; http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~hfrp/index.html

Institute for Responsive Education—promotes systematic education change through family-school-community collaboration in predominantly low-income areas. Boston, MA; (617) 373-2595; http://www.resp-ed.org/

Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP)—includes Parents As Learning Partners, aimed at assisting parents and schools to work collaboratively to increase student achievement. Los Angeles, CA; (213) 580-8888; http://www.laamp.org/

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE)—works to build comprehensive family-school partnerships. Fairfax, VA; (703) 359-8973; http://www.ncpie.org/

National Education Association—provides many resources on how schools can involve families. Washington, DC; (202) 833-4000; http://www.nea.org/

National Network of Partnership Schools—brings together schools, districts, and states committed to comprehensive school-family-community partnerships (http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000). Part of the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS), a research and development center at Johns Hopkins University. Baltimore, MD; (410) 516-8800; http://www.csos.jhu.edu/

National Parent Teacher Association (PTA)—has developed National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. Chicago, IL; (800) 307-4782; http://www.pta.org/

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL)—U.S. Department of Education site. Hosts the Pathways to School Improvement Web site (http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/pathwayg.htm); provides information, literature reviews, and resources on parent and family involvement. Naperville, IL; (630) 649-6500; (800) 356-2735; http://www.ncrel.org/

The Parent Institute—encourages parent involvement in the education of their children and publishes a variety of materials related to this topic. Sister organization of the Teacher Institute. Fairfax Station, VA; (703) 323-9170; (800) 756-5525; http://www.parent-institute.com/

Partnership for Family Involvement in Education (PFIE)—U.S. Department of Education office. Works to increase family participation in children's learning; resources, ideas, funding, and conferences; many publications and a listserv. Washington, DC; (202) 205-9133; (800) USA-LEARN; http://pfie.ed.gov/

The Teacher Institute—provides help to teachers to improve student learning; publishes a twice-monthly newsletter. Fairfax Station, VA; (703) 503-5413; (800) 333-0776; http://www.teacher-institute.com

Teachers Network—offers resources for teachers on many topics, including parent involvement. One of the programs offered is IMPACT II, which provides grants and networking opportunities for teachers. New York, NY; (212) 966-5582; http://www.teachersnetwork.org/

WestEd—offers suggestions about bridging cultural gaps between home and school. San Francisco, CA; (415) 565-3000; http://www.wested.org/

Web-based resources

Children First—message boards, e-mail accounts, and more from this National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Web site. www.pta.org/interact/index.htm

Education World—lesson plans and research materials. http://www.education-world.com/

Knowledge Loom—resources for teachers and administrators highlighting best practices in education and school, family, and community cooperation. http://www.knowledgeloom.org/

Learning Network for K-12—resources and information for teachers and parents; organized by grade level. http://www.learningnetwork.com/

Middle Grades/Middle School Network—listserv, networking, articles, and information about young adolescents' education, hosted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. http://www.naesp.org/cgi-bin/netforum/middle/a/1

MiddleWeb—free listserv about boosting teaching and learning in the middle grades. http://www.middleweb.com/MWlistserve.html

myschoolonline.com—free educational tools and resources; teachers and schools can build their own Web sites to communicate with parents. http://www.myschoolonline.com/

Teachers Network.org—identifies and connects innovative teachers with one another. http://www teachersnetwork.org

Urban Education Web—articles, bibliographies, summaries of publications, conferences, and other resources on parent involvement in urban education. http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/

Involving parents from different cultural groups

ASPIRA's APEX program—helps curb the trend of Hispanic high school dropouts by encouraging parents to play a greater role in their children's education. Washington, DC; (202) 835-3600

Clearinghouse for Immigrant Education (CHIME)—assists schools, parents, advocates, and students; offers information and strategies related to effective education of immigrant students. Boston, MA; (800) 441-7192; (617) 357-8507; http://www.ncas1.org/chime.htm

Hispanic Policy Development Project—advises schools on ways to improve family-school partnerships. New York, NY; (212) 477-5395

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund—helps protect and promote the civil rights of Latinos living in the United States and has National Parent/School Partnership Program to provide training, forums, awareness, and information about Latino parent involvement. Los Angeles, CA; (213) 629-2512; http://www.maldef.org/

National Asian Family-School Partnership Project—supports the involvement of immigrant Asian families in public schools. Boston, MA; (617) 357-8507

National Urban League (NUL)—provides information and training to families, educational administrators, and policy makers about issues that affect African Americans. New York, NY; (212) 558-5300; http://www.nul.org/

Suggested reading and sources used in this toolkit

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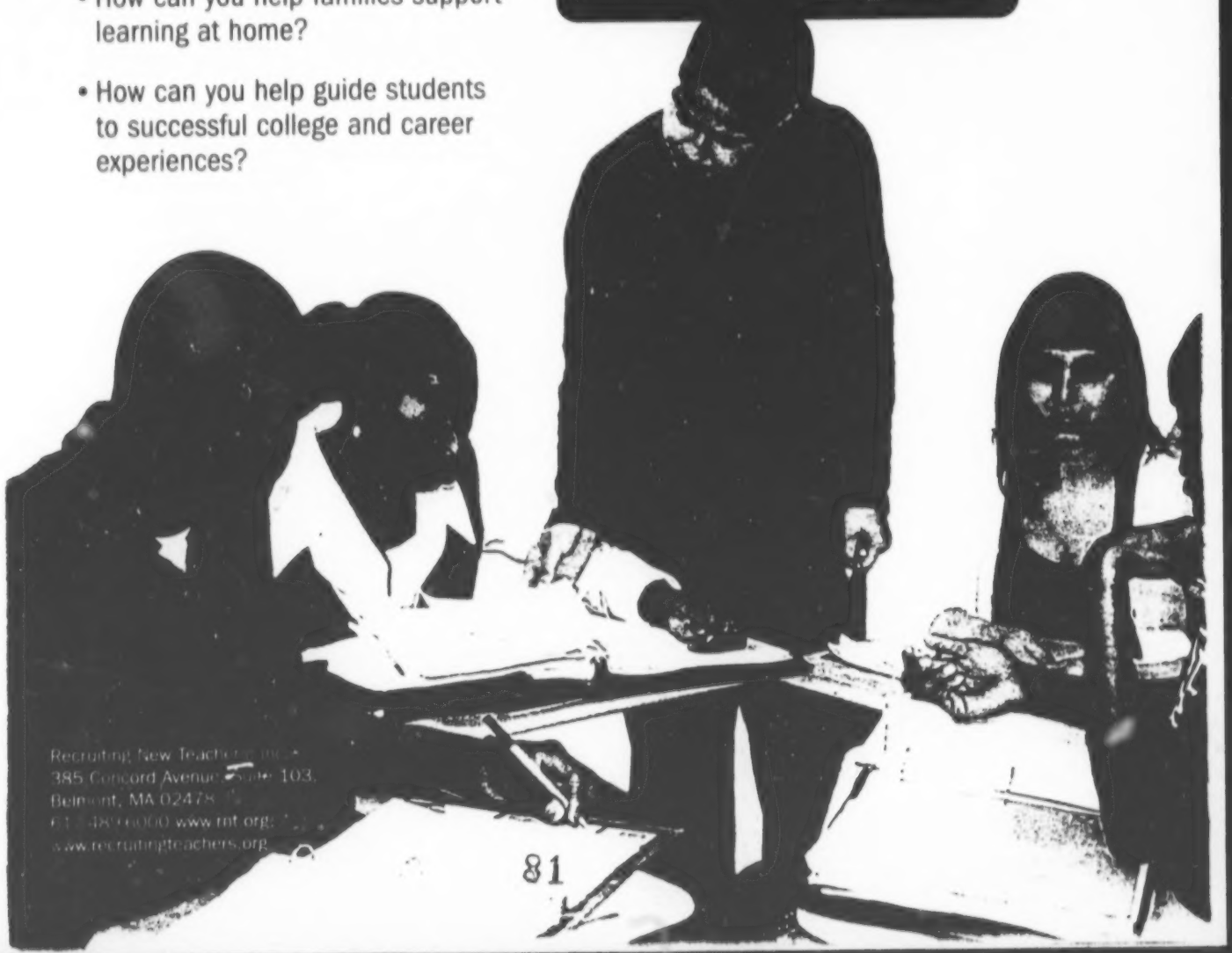

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